

Breaking the Silence: Exploring the Workplace Experiences of
Six Women With Learning Disabilities

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education

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Abstract

In the current economic climate, employees are expected to upgrade their skills in order to remain productive and competitive in the workplace, and many women with learning disabilities¹ may feel doubly challenged when dealing with such expectations. Although the number of people with reported learning disabilities who enter the workforce is expected to increase, a dearth of research focuses on work-related experiences of women with learning disabilities; consequently, employers and educators often are unaware of the obstacles and demands facing such individuals.

This qualitative narrative study sheds light on the work experiences of women with diagnosed or suspected learning disabilities. The study used semistructured interviews to explore their perspectives and reflections on learning in order to: (a) raise awareness of the needs of women with learning disabilities, (b) enhance their opportunities to learn in the workplace, and (c) draw attention to the need for improvement of inclusiveness in the workplace, especially for hidden disabilities. Study findings reveal that participants' learning was influenced by work relationships, the learning environments, self-determination, and taking personal responsibility. Moreover, the main accommodation requested was to have supportive and understanding work relationships and environments. Recommendations are made for future research and workplace improvements, most notably that no employees should be left behind through an employee-centered approach.

¹ Although the prefix *dis* (meaning “lack of”) in disability has a negative connotation, I use the word purposefully to illustrate individual differences and to highlight abilities as well as inabilities.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of incredible people. It is impossible to list all the names here but I would like to mention some of them.

Above all, I would like to thank God for leading me down this educational journey and for never sleeping. My faith has grown stronger through this experience and I pray that this study will make a positive difference in the lives of women with learning disabilities.

I am deeply grateful to my thesis advisor, Dr. Nancy Fenton, for her dedication, for guiding me every step of the way, for her never-ending encouragement, and for making sure that I never gave up. I also thank my committee members Dr. Nancy Taber and Dr. Sheila Bennett for their guidance and valuable feedback; thank you for keeping me focused and letting me see things from a different perspective. I would like to thank Dr. Denise Armstrong, Dr. Sandra Bosaki, Dr. Denise Paquette-Frenette, Dr. Joe Engemann, and Dr. Patrick O'Neill for giving me the foundation to write my thesis. I also wish to acknowledge and thank the administrators at Brock, in particular Lynn Duhaime and Jason Barfoot for their efforts in clearing the roadblocks. I cannot forget the professors from the Adult Education degree program for grooming me for a Master's degree, especially Guus de Man, Robynne Smith, and Loretta Howard.

I remain indebted to my parents; thanks for persuading me to pursue my postsecondary education, especially my mother for encouraging to pursue my Master's degree. I devote my deepest gratitude to my husband Bernie, for his patience, undivided support, and policing to ensure that I stayed on track. Loving thanks to my other family

members, especially: Allison, Rita (I am grateful for the phone calls), Damian, Ginelle, Stacey Ann, Michelle, Ryan, and Kevin, for believing in me and for their support.

Special thanks to Aunty Bessie and Patsy for their generous hospitality.

I would like to thank my friends who have encouraged and supported me along the way. Thanks to Christiane, for her friendship, wisdom, and ongoing support. Many thanks to my cheerleaders, Yvonne and Trevor, for their praise and encouraging words which have been invaluable to me. I would also like to express sincere thanks to Joanna for her willingness to help in any way that she could. Special thanks to Jane Walker not only for transcribing my interviews but also for recognizing the importance of my research.

My heartfelt gratitude to the employment resource centre that specializes in assisting individuals with learning disabilities, who made it possible for me to obtain participants, especially G. for not only providing expertise but also for his dedication to help find participants for my research. Last, but by no means least, the 6 women who participated in my research, thank you for your willingness to share your story. This is your work.

Thank you all for contributing to the success of my thesis.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my godparents. Although you are not here physically, I know that you were watching over me during this journey.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Dedication	v
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ...	 1
Purpose for the Study	1
Context of the Study.....	2
Research Problem and Rationale of Study	5
Questions to Be Addressed.....	10
Scope and Limitations of the Study.....	10
Organization of This Study	11
 CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	 12
Women's Learning and Work	12
Understanding Learning Disabilities.....	20
Canadian Legislation	23
Work Experiences of Individuals With Learning Disabilities	30
Learning in Postsecondary Education	33
Summary of Literature	38
 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN	 40
Research Design	40
Sample Selection	42
Data Collection.....	43
Data Analysis.....	46
Limitations.....	47
Establishing Trustworthiness.....	48
Ethical Consideration	49
 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	 51
Description of Participants	51
Common Themes.....	57
Summary of Findings	92
 CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	 94
Summary of Study.....	94
Discussion of Findings	95

Implications for Practice.....	103
Implications for Further Research.....	107
Reflection and Final Thoughts	109
References.....	113
Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Participants	135
Appendix B: Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter	137

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

“By recognizing individual differences, we foster individual gifts.

By understanding learning disabilities, we learn more about ourselves.”²

This is a study about workplace learning experiences. Specifically, I conducted a qualitative narrative study that explored the work experiences of 6 women with a diagnosed or suspected learning disability. In today’s workplace, there is a demand for job skills to be continuously updated as a result of changing technologies, intensifying global competition, and shrinking job promotional opportunities. To keep pace with the constant changes in today’s economy, organizations restructure and downsize to lower costs, which often requires greater productivity and flexibility from employees (Officer, 2009). Women with learning disabilities face these same issues in combination with challenges of learning, often alone, which may compromise their ability to achieve their full potential and risk their survival at work (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Fenwick, 2004).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide the purpose of the study, the context of the study, the research problem and rationale for the study, questions to be addressed, limitations of the study, and the outline of the remainder of the document.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the workplace experiences of 6 women with learning disabilities and to gain a deep understanding of their perspectives

² Citation attributed to Barbara K. Given and used during an Adult With Learning Disabilities online course at Centennial College, September 2004. Dr. Given granted permission to cite the passage (August 3, 2010) though she could not recall its exact source.

and reflections on their learning process. Explicitly, the study sought to provide insights into the factors that influenced their learning and the successes and challenges that shaped their learning strategies. According to Davis (2005), “acquiring a better understanding of a disability will enable us to...gain greater insight into the problems that face [people with disabilities] in our society” (p.156). An exploration of this aspect of workplace learning adds to the body of knowledge that builds understanding regarding women with disabilities’ learning in the workplace.

Context of the Study

This study is primarily motivated by my own learning experiences about the realities of learning disabilities. I personally do not have a learning disability; however, I recognized my ignorance and the lack of understanding of others in the educational settings and in the workplace, with respect to learning disabilities.

I regretfully admit that I held many misconceptions about learning disabilities. I honestly thought that learning disabilities were visible and that individuals with learning disabilities were lazy and lacked intelligence. As a result, I fell into the inexcusable trap of stereotyping. It seemed easier to make assumptions but it certainly was not the right thing to do.

I discovered the realities of learning disabilities when I became a tutor in an adult literacy program. During my training as a volunteer, the Program Coordinator erroneously informed us that learning disabilities were physical constraints—such as poor eyesight or hearing—that prevented students from learning. This information confirmed what I already believed to be true; I was naïve. My perspective changed regarding learning disabilities shortly after I heard the story of the first student I tutored. That

student felt strongly about having a special need and had experienced many barriers to learning. This individual struggled throughout life trying to read and even dropped out of school at age 11 because of feelings of frustration and inadequacy. My learner needed to read to get promoted; listening attentively and having someone else read the instructions interfered with the opportunity to move forward. Moreover, the truth would be revealed that he was unable to read.

At that time, I felt powerless because I did not know where to begin to help my student. As a result, I took a step forward and increased my knowledge by taking a course on learning disabilities. This is where I first learned that my previous thoughts on learning disabilities were false. After taking this course, the knowledge that I gained allowed me to teach my learner more effectively, even though I could not diagnose my student with having a learning disability. Knowing what I know now has made a big difference in the way I teach, the way I think, and the way in which I treat people. I have become more attentive to others' feelings and actions. I feel that I have come out of the darkness of ignorance and found the light of knowledge. Also, I realized that I have to keep the flame burning by sharing the information that I learned about learning disabilities with others.

Subsequently, I experienced another incident that happened in a postsecondary educational setting. The course instructor was going over the guidelines from the University Course Guide and bypassed the section on "Learners with Special Needs"; we simply went over what preceded and followed this section, I presumed because no one had an apparent disability. It made me think of times when people looked at me and turned in the other direction because of the colour of my skin; I am black. However, in

this particular classroom setting, I experienced discrimination against someone with a disability. For that moment, I tried to place myself in the position of someone with a learning disability. I felt isolated, intimidated, and excluded. I knew the facilitator unintentionally avoided learners with disabilities; consequently, I wrote about this incident in an assignment. As a result, the facilitator did apologize to the class. I encountered more professors who did not communicate the disability policy, especially in the first semester, during my journey for my Master's degree. There is an underlying assumption that the disability policy only applies to students with visible disabilities. In addition, there is the assumption that students are aware of this policy and educators are aware of the importance of this policy.

In spite of most educational systems having sufficient infrastructures to assist individuals with learning disabilities reach their full potential, there are still educators who are unaware of the challenges that students with disabilities face. Therefore, this left me concerned about the barriers that individuals with learning disabilities contend with in the workplace, especially when this type of disability impacts their learning and there is far less of an infrastructure to assist these workers. Moreover, I became a staff manager of a team composed entirely of women. I wondered if any of my staff were hiding a learning disability and how I would assist and support them. I contacted the Human Resources Manager from my former workplace to find out how the organization supported employees with learning disabilities. Surprisingly, my colleague did not know what the term learning disability meant, which gave me the opportunity to explain it. That manager informed me that any employee with a disability must present documentation in order to receive accommodations. I knew that this was unlikely

because many people with learning disabilities have not been assessed, partly due to the cost or being unaware they have a learning disability. Also, making a decision to disclose can be very difficult and often is avoided. According to Gerber (2006),

Adults are no longer exposed to the culture of school...where learning disabilities [are] accounted for by law in all its provisions and procedures. They live in a beyond-school world where learning disabilities [have] been heard of, but where little understanding and specificity can be assumed. (p. 50)

In addition, as Morrish and Buchanan (2001) state, “many women feel invisible rather than present, silent rather than heard and isolated in their experiences and thoughts” (p. 256). Women with disabilities often hold important insights about their lives and their needs that are derived from their daily experiences but which may be devalued by people with greater authority (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch, & Ignagni, 2005). As a result, I felt it was important to carry out this study.

Research Problem and Rationale of Study

Statistics Canada (2006b, 2007a) reported a remarkable growth in the number of women in the workforce compared to past decades, when many women were unemployed because they were up against additional challenges and discrimination in the workplace, such as gender bias (Fenwick, 2004; Gregory, 2003; Jackson, 2005).

Although discrimination against women in the workplace has declined as a result of the development in achieving equality and equity, some believe it still exists today (Fenwick, 2004; Gregory, 2003; Jackson, 2005). Women continue to be paid less and promoted less than their male counterparts (Bierema, 2001; Fenwick, 2004; Hayes, 2000b; Jackson, 2003; Jubas & Butterwick, 2008; Mojab & Gorman, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2006b).

Women are more likely to have narrower career options, hold lower paying positions, work fewer hours, find fewer full time jobs, and are less likely to have stable employment (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Bierema, 2001; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Hayes, 2000b; A. Jackson, 2005; S. Jackson, 2003; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002, Statistics Canada, 2006b). Gregory (2003) discusses commonly held false stereotypes of women in the workplace, including that they:

do not want to work; are less committed to their career than men; are not tough enough to succeed in the business world; generally are unable or unwilling to work long or unusual hours; are unable or unwilling to relocate geographically; are unable or unwilling to make decisions; are not sufficiently aggressive, rather they are too passive; are too emotional. (pp. 10-11)

These stereotypes often make it very difficult for women to be taken seriously in the workforce (Foldy, 2006; Hayes, 2001). Compounding this pressure, women more often carry the responsibility of balancing work, family, and household responsibilities (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Hoffschmidt & Weinstein, 2003; Jackson, 2005; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). Fundamentally, attitudes, beliefs, misconceptions, and social and historical influences serve as stumbling blocks to richer opportunities for women in the workplace (Bierema, 2001; Fenwick, 2004; Foldy, 2006; Gregory, 2003).

Similarly, individuals with learning disabilities are vulnerable to discrimination. Learning disabilities can be difficult to notice. Oftentimes, they are referred to as hidden disabilities or as invisible disabilities; thereby making it is a less apparent form of disability (Koller & Holliday, 1998; McDonald, Keys, & Balcazar, 2009; Wolf, 2001).

Because of the invisible nature of learning disabilities, individuals often encounter skepticism from co-workers about the authenticity of their disability, especially in the workplace (McDonald et al., 2009; Reiff, 1998). Consequently, individuals with learning disabilities compete to stay employed (Officer, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2006a). Koller and Holliday (1998) note that

Just as individuals without disabilities face increasing barriers to employment (e.g., vocational/technical certification, college degree requirements, job downsizing), the individual with [a learning disability] must compete with people without such disabilities not only in the job market but also in the current workforce. (p. 295)

Thus, overcoming obstacles in the workplace can be increasingly challenging.

Approximately 1 in 10 Canadians have a learning disability (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], n.d.b). According to Statistics Canada (2007b), nearly 631,000 Canadians aged 15 years and older reported having a learning disability, which increased by approximately 40% from 2001. The LDAC (2007) initiated a study called *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities*, which found that people with learning disabilities between the ages of 15 to 44 are less likely to be employed, compared to adults in the same age group. The findings also revealed that these individuals are not being accommodated in the workplace, which is essential for their success. In addition, the *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey* (Statistics Canada, 2006a) on people with hidden disabilities, which includes learning disabilities, indicated reports of discrimination, such as: being denied a job, given fewer responsibilities, being paid less

for performing similar job tasks, and given no accommodations. The statistics also showed that the most common barrier was inadequate training to do their jobs.

Women with disabilities are less likely to learn and to have opportunities to maximize their full potential in the workplace compared to individuals without disabilities because of stigma and discrimination attached to gender and disability (Fuller, Munro, & Rainbird, 2004). As a consequence they experience fewer opportunities for company-sponsored informal and formal training, lower pay, less job security, and less participation in job and departmental decisions (Jackson, 2003; Livingstone, 2007; Roman, 2009; Schur, Kruse, Blasi, & Blanck, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2006a, 2006b). For example, the Federal Disability Report (Government of Canada, 2009) declared that women with disabilities earn approximately \$11,000 less per year than men with disabilities. In essence, women with learning disabilities face double jeopardy in the labour market; they face discrimination due to both their disability and their gender, which can make them more vulnerable. In addition, the visibility of race and being unemployed can add to the challenges of being a woman with an invisible disability. Therefore, the opportunities for learning in the workplace decrease for women with learning disabilities (Jackson, 2003). The complexities related to women with learning disabilities in the workplace may interfere with the ongoing development of their skills, knowledge, and job performance. It is difficult to learn at work when an individual works fewer hours, struggles to keep up with work demands, deals with discrimination, tries to balance work and life responsibilities, and competes against colleagues who do not have a learning disability.

Workplace learning helps employees to build self-confidence through a variety of learning opportunities that can increase autonomy that is important for self-direction and skill and knowledge development, which are essential to function effectively on the job (Evans, Kersh, & Sakamoto, 2004; Fuller et al., 2004; Matthews, 1999). As Peter Senge (2006) contends,

Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative of life. (p. 13)

In other words, learning in the workplace can lead to job productivity, job advancement, and job retention. However, many employers, employees, and educators remain unaware of the obstacles that women with learning disabilities encounter and the extra demands they are faced with in the workplace. It is estimated that more people with learning disabilities will enter the workforce due to higher volumes of people in the general population reporting their learning disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2006a). To date, research information on the experiences of women with learning disabilities in the workplace is scarce.

My main goal is to develop the knowledge of many employers, employees, and educators with regards to the challenges that women with learning disabilities face in the workplace and deepen appreciation of the uniqueness that these individuals bring. It is my hope that the findings from this study will: (a) raise awareness of the needs of women with learning disabilities; (b) enhance their opportunities to learn in the workplace; and

(c) draw attention to the need to improve inclusiveness in the workplace, especially for hidden disabilities. Also, it is my hope that individuals with learning disabilities can be successful in the workplace if they are treated with respect and are given the proper tools to help them overcome obstacles to improve their occupational outcomes and to maximize their full potential. Therefore, this study makes a case for the importance of understanding the experiences and perspectives of women with learning disabilities in order to provide equitable learning opportunities in the workplace.

Questions to Be Addressed

The workplace learning experiences of women with learning disabilities were explored through the following empirical questions:

1. What factors influence workplace learning for women with a learning disability?
2. What are the challenges and successes in learning in the workplace for women with a learning disability?
3. What strategies contribute to positive learning outcomes in the workplace for women with a learning disability?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The research was confined to a small group size (6 participants), implying that the results cannot be applied to the general population. The participants' stories do not share the voices of all women with learning disabilities; therefore, there should not be overgeneralization of the analysis (Morrish & Buchanan, 2001). While the use of a qualitative research methodology brings understanding of a complex issue (Creswell, 2005), the focus is on understanding the participants' interpretation and accounts of their

experiences in the context of the work setting rather than on providing a detailed analysis. Therefore, conclusions from the study are suggestive of possible factors that impact women with learning disabilities in the workplace. The study is neither exhaustive nor applicable in all workplace situations.

Additionally, I am the narrator without a learning disability, which may have limited my understanding of the participants' challenges and the richness of their experiences. However, I developed a particular sensitivity to their issues, especially after being discriminated against because of my race and from the experience of being unemployed. As a result, the participants were open and willing to share their stories.

Organization of the Study

The study contains five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study and provides the purpose and context of the study, background to the research problem and rationale of the study, research questions, and scope and limitations of the investigation. Chapter 2 reviews and discusses relevant literature that informed the study; it explores existing studies that relate to women with learning disabilities learning in the workplace. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology and explains the rationale for choosing an exploratory qualitative approach in this study. It also outlines my methodology, data collection approach, and the analytic strategy. Chapter 4 presents research findings, whereas chapter 5 discusses and analyzes the findings. An argument that is highlighted in both of these chapters is that learning can be unsuccessful without proper working environments and accommodations. Chapter 5 concludes by exploring the implications for practice and recommendations for further research. Lastly, I present my reflection and thoughts on the participants' stories.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

“It makes sense that whatever the topic is, it’s more compelling if you can provide the audience with a range of perspectives, and you can cross disciplines. And you don’t have to control what people take out of it” (Johnson Reagon, n.d.).

This chapter examines literature related to women with learning disabilities in the workplace which underpins the relevance of this study. I engaged with literature that focused on women’s learning and work, learning disabilities, Canadian legislation, work experiences of individuals with learning disabilities, and learning in postsecondary education to fully appreciate the nuances of existing research that has contributed to this current study. The literature I have selected is mostly of North American content.

Women’s Learning and Work

Learning at work plays a key role for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is about opportunity and growth. It is essential for personal development and career success (Jackson, 2003; Kolb, 1984). Individuals who learn new skills, abilities, and knowledge at work are more likely to have a better chance at improving their job performance (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007). Yet, according to Hayes (2000b), “The nature of women’s paid employment and the context of the workplace affect the skills and knowledge that women need to learn, what they learn, and how they learn these skills and knowledge” (p. 34). In this section, I look at the issues that impact women’s full participation in learning in the workplace, as affected by the home, work, and educational institutions.

Women’s Learning

Women learn in a variety of ways according to their lives, preferences, and learning styles (Cranton, 2000; English, 2006; Hayes & Flannery, 2000); this may

include learning in their homes, their community, educational institutions, and the workplace (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Gouthro, 2005; Hayes, 2000b). However, the skills that women often acquire in the domestic setting, such as household activities and raising children, are widely unrecognized outside of the home because they do not lead to qualifications that are recognized in the workplace, even though they improve time management, planning, and organizational skills (Bierema, 2001; Evans et al., 2004; Fenwick, 2004; Gouthro, 2005). Evans et al. (2004) report that many women believe valuable learning comes from their household experiences.

Women are often perceived as learning through collaboration, relationships, sharing, and connection typically based on their traditional roles as caretakers (English, 2006; Flannery, 2000b; Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Hayes, 2001). MacKeracher (2004) believes that some women are relational learners while others are autonomous learners. Belenky et al. (1997) developed a popular theory about how females gained knowledge, through a study on individual life experiences in the contexts of formal postsecondary education setting and family; hence, excluding women from the workplace. The researchers established several stages of intellectual development in which women acquire knowledge. Flannery (2000a) considers *connected knowing* as the most prevalent stage in the study; it involves women who are relationally connected whereby their learning incorporates the perspectives of others including their family and/or friends. However, Hayes (2001) argues that placing emphasis on women's learning toward relationships can create stereotypes whereby women are unable to be autonomous, competitive, or self-directed.

Flannery (2000a) and Hayes (2001) report that intuition, subjectivity, and emotions are also presumed as other ways in which women learn. The predominant learning mode for *subjective knowing*, which is another stage from Belenky et al.'s (1997) study, is from inner sources and not from external authority. However, Hayes (2001) states that, similar to relationships, the idea of intuition as an approach to learning for women can reinforce the misconception that they have irrational, thoughtless, and unreasonable thoughts.

Women's learning is complex because issues of learning can be seen as part of a larger social construct, which includes factors such as race, class, and ability (English, 2006; Gouthro, 2005). Moreover, the assumptions with respect to women's learning fail to consider the differences among women (Flannery, 2000b). Some of women's learning is related to their identity and self-esteem; women can have a combination of different identities that are often based on gender, race, and class and they value their identities in various ways which may also influence their leaning (Flannery, 2000b). Many feminist writers argue that the unique concerns of women learners need to be recognized because of societal pressures; women have different expectations placed on them compared to men (Taber & Gouthro, 2006).

Learning at Work

The workplace can be the most important environment for many adults to learn and further develop their vocational skills (Billett, 2002; Paloniemi, 2006). The skills and qualifications of employees in the workplace are perceived to be central to productivity (Fuller et al., 2004). Workplace learning can be formal and informal (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2009; Matthews, 1999; Tynjälä, 2008). Formal

learning takes place in an organized and structured setting such as on-the-job training or by taking courses in an educational setting, and learning outcomes are often predictable (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2009; Matthews, 1999; Tynjälä, 2008). On the contrary, informal learning tends to occur during everyday activities, which can be unplanned, unintentional, or collaborative, and the learning outcomes can be unpredictable and considered by many employees as the most viable source of how to learn on the job (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2009; Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson, & Kakavelakis, 2007; Livingstone, 2007; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Matthews, 1999; Tynjälä, 2008). Examples of informal learning include mentoring, coaching, and self-directed learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Bierema (2001) believes that a work relationship such as mentoring can be important for fostering learning for women. Other scholars (e.g., Kahn, 2007; Ragins & Dutton, 2007) argue that work relationships are valuable sources of personal support, enrichment, and vitality; they help individuals thrive, grow, and flourish. Tynjälä (2008) asserts that learning in collaboration with colleagues, by exchanging knowledge and sharing expertise, can enhance individual learning in the workplace. Ashton (2004) contends that open and trusted relationships are required in the workplace in order for learning to be effective and for employees to be able to learn from their mistakes without being ridiculed. Fenwick (2004) believes the division of gender creates a barrier for women to participate in informal and formal learning opportunities. Hence, women are more likely to participate in informal learning rather than formal learning due to their domestic responsibilities outside of work.

Workplace learning is also challenging because the training structures and organizational knowledge bases largely are created, controlled, and maintained by

patriarchal values (Bierema, 2001; Fenwick, 2004; Mojab & Gorman, 2003).

Consequently, male preferences may give more weight than that of women; the goals that some men have in the workplace are likely representative of the organizational goals.

Moreover, employers are unlikely to invest in developing employees who work part-time, which include a large number of women, because they view them as less committed

(Fenwick, 2004). Mojab and Gorman (2003) contend that development opportunities are given primarily to people who are at higher levels (e.g., management positions), which

are often held by men. Bierema (2001) claims successful women often accept and follow a male dominated culture. For instance, a study conducted by Jubas and Butterwick

(2008) showed that women working in the Information Technology field tended to be

assigned administrative responsibilities while men were frequently promoted. Their

results further stated that women who held positions in IT indicated that the time they

spent engaging in informal learning activities took away from the home responsibilities.

Often, women's involvement in their own development in the workplace is ignored

(Fenwick, 2004; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002; Gouthro, 2005; Jackson, 2003).

Meaningful learning occurs when adults are engaged in their learning and learn through their experiences (Billett, 2004; Dewey, 1963; Evans et al., 2004; Kolb, 1984).

Fenwick (2004) believes that "Women may be excluded altogether from learning

opportunities because their learning processes need flexibilized working conditions and

locations that are not considered in the planning and delivery of training" (p. 175).

Additionally, workplaces often transfer an abundance of training to educational

institutions, which extend the regular workday of women without providing

compensation (Jørgensen, 2004; Mojab & Gorman, 2003). Therefore, employees spend

their own time upgrading their skills (Mojab & Gorman, 2003). Consequently, women tend to have less access to a range of training opportunities because they are geographically isolated, lack time, and are unable to pay for programs (Jackson, 2003; Scott-Dixon, 2004). Fenwick (2004) also states “that in workplace organizations everyday social activity carried out by women in relationship building, conflict mediation, organizing and knowledge translation may be invisible or taken-for-granted” (p.175). In some circumstances, work demands on women are intensifying due to longer working hours, increasing workloads, and challenges of balancing work and domestic responsibilities; therefore, leaving less time for themselves (Gouthro, 2005; Hayes, 2000b; Mojab & Gorman; 2003). This has forced some women to leave formal organizations and start their own business to get more flexibility between work and raising a family (Fenwick, 2002).

Bierema (2001) argues that cultural standards dictate how women participate in the global labour market; women’s career development is complex because of societal expectations of them being the primary caregiver and “women are more likely to leave and reenter the workforce for personal reasons which can interfere with their career goals” (p. 54). On-the-job training may neglect the combination of work and family, work satisfaction, job performance, and career advancement (Hayes, 2000c). In other words, the boundaries of work, home, and community life are largely ignored in the labour markets (Fenwick, 2004; Mojab & Gorman, 2003). In addition, social factors such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, culture, age, sexualities, geography, and ability are frequently disregarded (Fenwick, 2004; Gouthro, 2005; Jackson, 2003; Mojab & Gorman, 2003).

Howell et al. (2002) conducted a study with women from the manufacturing and education sectors, to explore their workplace learning through Human Resource Development; this analysis offers a prime example of the barriers that are endured by women in the workplace. They found that women had the opportunity to make decisions, however, they were unable to voice what they felt was important to them. Similarly, the educational opportunities they received were tailored to create the ideal worker instead of developing their skills. The training requirements increased their workload and they received added responsibilities without being compensated for it. Some of the training sessions were in conflict with what the women valued. As a result, the general perception, particularly of older women, was that they resisted change. In essence, there was a hidden agenda regarding the development for these women; the organization appeared to be interested in the welfare of their employees' success; however, the company invested in their employees' development according to their own standards because of the power they held.

Although there is very little focus on the learning of women with disabilities in the labour force, women in general face several barriers that influence their learning, which includes: exclusion from their learning, structural barriers, gender inequalities, power imbalances, and societal pressures (Bierema, 2001; English, 2006; Fenwick, 2004; Hayes, 2000b; Howell et al., 2002; Gouthro, 2005; Jackson, 2003; Taber & Gouthro, 2006). Fuller and Unwin (2004) reported that environments in which employees had limited access to career and development training were considered "restrictive" workplace learning environments, which negatively impact job transition, access to learning, vision, and recognition. On the contrary, expansive environments provide

opportunities to foster learning in the workplace. Most of the literature suggests that women's learning in the workplace takes place in restrictive learning environments. Moreover, the conditions of the environment can affect learning (Burke & Doolan, 2008; Evans & Kersh, 2004; Matthew, 1999). Workplace environments and the characteristics of the workplace can provide opportunities and barriers for learning (Matthews, 1999; Rainbird, Fuller, & Munro, 2004). As Wlodkowski (2008) contends, "when mutual respect is present in a learning environment, adults normally feel safe, accepted and able to influence the situation when appropriate and necessary" (p.160). Negative work environments can create conditions that minimize the capacity of employees to complete their job tasks effectively and positive work environments tend to provide opportunities for their workers to develop and grow and achieve high performance (Carmeli, 2009). Bierema (2001) states the workplace is a social institution that mirrors the forces of society and power structures. For instance, learning for women is dependent on the roles they play outside the workplace, such as a caregiver, mother, and nurturer (Jackson, 2003).

Few studies included the voices and personal accounts of women with regards to their successes and challenges of learning in the workplace. According to Hayes (2000c),

Voice as power reflects the perspective that women's learning is affected by unequal power relationship and that for women a goal of learning can be to acquire individual and collective power through the expression and validation of their interests, needs and experiences. (p. 108)

Some literature (English 2006; Hayes, 2000a; Gouthro, 2005; Jackson, 2003; Mojab & Gorman, 2003) stated that factors such as abilities, which can influence learning, are

ignored. Therefore, ongoing research, including the personal accounts of women with learning disabilities, is needed to understand the barriers they face in order to improve the participation of their learning in the workplace. Rogers (2007) believes the experience of adult learning needs to be incorporated in order to maximize their learning, which encompasses the home environment due to its significant impact on the lives of women with regards to identity, relationships, and labour in relation to lifelong learning (Gouthro, 2005).

Understanding Learning Disabilities

The literature indicates that individuals with learning disabilities have often been subjected to a number of false judgments that include such derogatory terms as lazy, unmotivated, slow, incompetent, dumb, stupid, uncooperative, emotionally disturbed, and crazy (Castellanos & Septeowski, 2004; Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004; Hoffschmidt & Weinstein, 2003; McNamara, 2007; Price, Gerber, & Mulligan, 2003; Price, Gerber, & Shessel, 2002; Reiff, 1998; Valle, Solis, Volipitta, & Connor, 2004). As a result, individuals with learning disabilities sometimes feel a mixture of emotions such as embarrassment, shame, and fear because of the stigma associated with the aforementioned labels (McDonald et al., 2009). Moreover, the concept of learning disabilities differs from the concept of intellectual disabilities, mental retardation, autism, or behavioural disorders (LDAC, n.d.a). In contrast to popular misconceptions, Ketter (2006) found that people with learning disabilities are generally sensitive, determined, hardworking, persistent, creative, and passionate, and most individuals with a learning disability have average to above-average intelligence (Gregg, 2009; Walcot-Gayda, n.d.).

It is important to define the term learning disability in order to fully understand the realities and challenges individuals face. While a number of researchers point to psychologist Samuel Kirk's initial use of the term "learning disability" in 1963 (Hallahan, Lloyd, Kauffman, Weiss, & Martinez, 2005; McDonald et al., 2009; McNamara, 2007; Wong, Graham, Hoskyn, & Berman, 2008), the term itself, like so many other concepts, is not universally accepted. I use the LDAC's definition that "continues to be recognized and has influenced several of the definitions adopted by many [Canadian] provinces" (Weiner & Siegel, 1992, p. 342):

Learning Disabilities refer to a number of disorders, which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making). (LDAC, 2002, ¶s 1-2)

The LDAC (n.d.a) further states that learning disabilities are lifelong conditions, while Wong et al. (2008) add that learning disabilities are unique to each individual. Learning disabilities may be caused by a single or a combination of genetic or neurobiological factors (e.g., an injury; complications during pregnancy and birth) that alters brain functions; however, there is no research that offers definitive evidence to

support such claims (LDAC, n.d.a). Nevertheless, learning disabilities cannot be cured or outgrown (Gregg, 2009; McNamara, 2007), and they can range from mild to severe and may affect the acquisition and the use of one or more of the following: oral language, reading, writing, listening, and mathematics (LDAC, n.d.a; Wong, et al., 2008).

Characteristics of a learning disability include problems with auditory, visual, motor, and conceptual skills, as well as difficulties with spelling, attention, reasoning, spatial relations, problem solving, and other social-emotional and organizational skills. Some of the signs of a learning disability include an inability to follow written or verbal instructions; poor hand and eye coordination; an inability to communicate through spoken or written language; poor time management; an inability to organize tasks; poor math skills; and poor short-term memory (Hoffschmidt & Weinstein, 2003; McNamara, 2007, Vogel, 1998; Wong et al., 2008). Some of the daily challenges adults with learning difficulties encounter include: making bank transactions, reading instructions or ingredients, writing cheques, organizing time, and/or managing money (McNamara, 2007; Reiff, 1998). Although many individuals are diagnosed with learning disabilities when they are children; some are diagnosed after they become adults particularly when enrolled in higher education and others remain undiagnosed (Obi, 2004; Westby, 2000).

Essentially, individuals with a learning disability likely will struggle to learn through traditional methods and might experience difficulty in processing information and/or have a discrepancy between their abilities and their achievements (Hatt, 2004; Philpott & Cahill, 2008; Williams & Schutt Upadhyay, 2003). But as Hallahan et al. (2005) contend, “people with learning disabilities [are] not a type: they are individuals who require specialized instruction and access to accommodations and other adaptations

that will permit them to succeed” (p. 2). Moreover, individuals with learning disabilities are a heterogeneous population with a multitude of strengths and weaknesses; they can be successful just like others without learning disorders (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; McNamara, 2007).

The consequences of misunderstanding the concept of learning disabilities may cause stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination (Granger, 1996; Reiff, 1998, Valle et al., 2004). Hence, it is possible that there are people in the workforce today who are struggling and but remain unaware of having a learning disability. Therefore, it is important to understand some of the workplace challenges and the experiences of people with learning disabilities, particularly women, in order to educate and support people in workplace environments who may influence their development.

Canadian Legislation

Canada has implemented legislation prohibiting discrimination against women and individuals with disabilities. First, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), under “Equality Rights,” states:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (15.(1))

Second, the *Employment Equity Act* (1995), similarly created to protect women and individuals with disabilities against discrimination in the workplace, states:

The purpose of this Act is to achieve equality in the workplace so that no person

shall be denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability and, in the fulfilment of that goal, to correct the conditions of disadvantage in employment experienced by women, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities by giving effect to the principle that employment equity means more than treating persons in the same way but also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences. (p. 1)

Canadian provinces all have their own way of dealing with the issue of disabilities; it is not universal (Bowland, 2004). Ontario's *Human Rights Code* recognizes that all individuals in Canada should be treated equally and with dignity in the workplace; it protects against discrimination and harassment. The Code—which includes learning disabilities in its general definition of disability—states that “Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to employment without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, record of offences, marital status, family status or disability” (Service ‘ Ontario, 1990, section 5.1). More recently, Ontario introduced legislation titled the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA; Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2005) that calls on public, corporate, and not-for-profit sectors to develop, implement, and enforce a set of mandatory accessibility standards. Specifically, the AODA builds upon accessibility in five key areas: employment, customer service, information and communications, transportation, and built environment. In addition, the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations Human Rights, 2007), an international human rights instrument, outlined a series of commitments to improve the working conditions for

employees with disabilities. Nevertheless, in spite of the aforementioned legislation, the Canadian Human Rights Commission's *2009 Annual Report* indicates that disability issues continue to face many human rights-related challenges, such as the attitudinal barrier toward individuals with disabilities.

Accommodations

Reasonable accommodation is a central component of the disability portion of the Code. According to Granger (1996), "reasonable accommodation refers to the requirement that employers make any necessary adjustments in the job or job environment to ensure that employees with disabilities have the same rights and privileges as other employees" (p. 82). In other words, accommodations are required to meet the needs of employees with disabilities so they may perform their job functions; it allows them the same advantages and opportunities at work as those without disabilities (Gregg, 2009; Paetzold et al., 2008). However, Bowland (2004) reports that an employer can refuse to accommodate employees if they can prove undue hardship, which means accommodations provided by an employer that are too costly to maintain. Consequently, there is no mandate in Canada for disability policies that make employers provide accommodations (Campolieti, 2009). Wilton and Schuer (2006) contend that governmental attempts to bring on mandatory change, with respect to working conditions, emphasize voluntary compliance and incentives. Consequently, without the enforcement of the laws, the employers have the power to hire, to accommodate, and to terminate people with disabilities without scrutiny. In addition, Gregg (2009) believes that "The most significant barrier facing individuals qualified to receive specific accommodations is the lack of professional knowledge about issues pertaining to these

accommodations. Without an understanding of these complex issues, accommodations may be overused, underused, or misused” (pp. 1-2).

At present, the onus is on the employee to self-disclose to the employer any disability-related needs and to provide supporting information to receive reasonable accommodations. Oftentimes, it is difficult for individuals to prove they have a learning disability. Employers may require documentation from qualified experts to provide the proper accommodations; however, it can be expensive to obtain such information. According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (n.d.), the cost of assessing a learning disability can range from \$800 to \$1,500, and the provincial health plan and insurance plans do not cover all assessments or evaluations, especially if psychologist assessment is required. As a result, many people remain undiagnosed and may be unaware that they have a learning disability. There is also the possibility of learning disabilities being misdiagnosed by a physician and attributed instead to depression, stress, and anxiety (Davis, 2005; Hoffschmidt & Weinstein, 2003).

Alternatively, Campolieti (2009) argues that if people with disabilities are unable to perform their job duties or cannot find a more suitable job, there is a possibility that they must withdraw from the workforce. Price et al. (2002), in particular, found that a significant number of employees with learning disabilities were unfamiliar with the legislation; therefore, they did not make use of their rights. Contrarily, employees who knew of the legislation felt there was little difference in the work environment. These employees still felt that they were treated unfairly. Moreover, it is the employees' responsibility to prove that they have been wrongfully treated by the employer based on their disability, and it is also their responsibility to file a complaint against the employers

who discriminates and harasses them, including refusal to accommodate, which may result in employees deciding not to pursue the complaint; instead they continue to face barriers (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.; Wilton & Schuer, 2006).

Self-Disclosure

Another factor that can impact reasonable accommodations is self-disclosure. The act of disclosing a learning disability in the workplace is a highly personal process that is subject to a number of ongoing factors (Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Valle et al., 2004). Disclosure may occur for several reasons: to explain job performance, to obtain accommodations, or to avoid deception; therefore, disclosure serves as a way to self-advocate and to educate employers and colleagues about their learning disability, and/or for self-empowerment regarding individual accomplishments and independence (García, Paetzold, & Colella, 2005; Madaus, 2008; Paetzold et al., 2008; Price et al., 2002; Roberts & Hoff Macan, 2006). Many individuals with learning disabilities conceal their disability because they feel confident that they can perform their job effectively and the outcome of disclosure creates uncertainty (Gerber et al., 2004; Madaus, 2008; Price et al., 2002; Reiff, 1998). There can be negative implications from colleagues and management who believe an individual is faking a disability in order to obtain an unfair advantage (Davis, 2005; Paetzold et al., 2008; Ragins, 2008). Davis (2005) argues that disclosure is difficult because working without accommodations makes performance expectations and coworker interrogation even more challenging.

The decision that individuals make to keep their disabilities a secret has been compared to gay men and lesbians who conceal their sexuality to avoid labeling, discrimination, and stigmatization (Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005; Davis, 2005; Hillyer,

1993; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). Individuals with learning disabilities fear losing their jobs, being misjudged, being demoted, and appearing incompetent (Dyck, 1996, Gerber et al., 2004; Madaus, 2008; Officer, 2009; Price et al., 2003; Price, Gerber, Mulligan, & Williams, 2005; Price et al., 2002; Stone, 2005; Valle et al., 2004; Wilton, 2006). These fears can lead to feelings of rejection, humiliation, shame, frustration, low self-esteem, psychological strain, and stress-related illnesses (McDonald et al., 2009; Ragins, 2008). As a result, many individuals with learning disabilities rely on the imposter syndrome, to deal with their challenges of productivity, multitasking, and flexibility in the workplace (Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Wilton, 2004). They prefer to hide rather than admit that there is a problem (Lingsom, 2008; Ragins, 2008; Roman, 2009). It is easier for them to be silent and to hide their impairments than to expose a disorder and risk stigmatization. Ferri and Gregg (1998) believe that

The issue of “passing” is particularly relevant to women with hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities, who face additional pressure to pass. They say behind “passing” lies the implicit assumption to be abled is normal, rather than calling into question the unsteady construction of normal. (p. 435)

In addition, societal pressures placed on women can make it easy for women to minimize their learning disability (Dale, 2005; Williams & Schutt Upadhyay, 2003). Women with disabilities are confronted at an early age with the pressure to be “normal” (for instance, by hiding their imperfections with makeup) later feel that they fail to conform to the ideal of so-called normalcy (Rice, 2002; Stone, 1993). Women often are valued in the world according to their beauty and abilities, which at times are unfairly polarized by acceptance or rejection (Rice, 2002). There are few positive portrayals of women living

with a disability through media, such as magazines, books, newspapers, and television; instead, women with disabilities often view themselves as unacceptable and inadequate (Rice, 2002; Rice et al., 2005). Nosek, Huges, Swedlund, Taylor, and Swank (2003) note that the self-worth of women with disabilities “may be compromised by internalizing the negative person and social devaluation that society tends to equate with [a disability]” (p. 1738). According to Hoffschmidt and Weinstein (2003), our culture compounds the struggle to compensate for having learning disorders by conveying the expectation that women be “superwomen” by juggling the demands of a career and a family. For instance, Dyck (1996) found that women with multiple sclerosis resisted disclosure in the workplace because they wanted “to maintain the integrity of their existing social identity” (p. 128). Many women share the need to search for self, to be found, and struggle to meet societal expectations of what it is to be women (Flannery, 2000b). In essence women with disabilities tend to protect their self-image (Rice et al., 2005).

Madaus (2008) conducted a study on university students diagnosed with learning disabilities who graduated and explored their employment experiences and outcomes. Interestingly, all students in the study disclosed when they were in university; however, the study reported that only half of the participants disclosed in the workplace, although 75% stated that they needed to be accommodated to do their job effectively. The majority of participants failed to disclose because they wanted to avoid the negative impacts on workplace relationships and job security.

Ragins (2008) claims that hiding a disability in a supportive environment is quite different from concealing a disability in an environment where individuals react negatively to the stigmatized identity; disclosure in a positive environment could be an

enriching experience but could be devastating in a negative environment. Moreover, Ragins (2008) provides three types of environmental support for disclosure: (a) the presence of others who have successfully disclosed; (b) the presence of supportive relationships with others who are excluded from being stigmatized; and (c) institutional support that offers safe and environments for stigmatized individuals.

Access to accommodations in the workplace is often dependent on the individuals' disclosure of their disability-related needs. Consequently, research shows that most individuals avoid disclosure, regardless of their entitlement by law, during the interview process or while on the job; hence, accommodations are not provided (Price et al., 2003; Price et al., 2005; Price et al., 2002). Price et al. (2003) have found that respondents separated their work experience from their disability; therefore, they were unaware of their rights to request accommodations.

Some of the literature (Dyck, 1996; Hoffschmidt & Weinstein, 2003; Nosek et al., 2003; Williams & Schutt Upadhyay, 2003) showed that women with hidden disabilities found that societal pressures made disclosure difficult. Even though the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and the *Human Rights Code* (1990) protect women with learning disabilities against discrimination and state that they should be treated with dignity and respect, research still shows they face challenges in the workplace (Government of Canada, 2009). As a result, further research is needed to determine and understand the challenges that women with learning disabilities face in the workplace.

Work Experiences of Individuals with Learning Disabilities

Employment among individuals with hidden disabilities have many benefits: income, personal fulfillment, material comfort, building confidence, empowerment,

independence, sense of purpose, sense of self and sense of identity, opportunities to make contributions to society, and a chance to develop skills and knowledge, especially after individuals have been socially marginalized and often denied access to employment (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Schur, 2002). Some studies (Madaus, 2008; Price et al., 2003; Price et al., 2005; Price et al., 2002) explored individuals with learning disabilities in the workplace but a relatively small number of studies focused primarily on women. As a result, I reviewed the literature broadly to better understand the issues that may impact the success of individuals with disabilities in the workplace.

Many of the studies reported that a significant number of individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to find jobs with the support of family, friends, and employment agencies (Gerber et al., 1992; Gerber et al., 2004; Price et al., 2003; Price et al., 2002). However, the literature seldom discussed individuals with learning disabilities having support networks available to them on the job. Lindstrom and Benz (2002) found that prosperous career development for young women with learning disabilities included: support from the family and the workplace, high motivation, determination, vocational training, and opportunities for career exploration. A handful of research studies (Gerber et al., 1992; Hoffschmidt & Weinstein, 2003; Madaus, 2008; Price et al., 2002) showed employees developed strategies and techniques to help overcome workplace obstacles to perform their jobs. In such cases, employees with disabilities built on their strengths by avoiding exposure of their weaknesses (Madaus, 2008; Price et al., 2002; Reiff, 1998). Assistive technology, such as tape recorders, calculators, and computers were used to adapt to work environments (Gerber et al., 1992; Price et al., 2002). Compensatory strategies, such as taking extra time to complete tasks and obtaining extra assistance were

also important for adapting to work environments (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Madaus, 2008).

For the most part, individuals with learning disabilities managed to be successful by having self-determination and perseverance, fostering control by setting and achieving goals, knowing their strengths and weakness, developing compensatory strategies, having emotional stability, taking advantage of technology, finding environments that matched their abilities, surrounding themselves with supportive family members and friends, and recognizing and accepting their learning disabilities, which is also referred to as reframing (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Castellanos & Septeowski, 2004; Gerber et al., 1992; Hallahan et al., 2005; Madaus, 2008; McNamara, 2007; Price et al., 2002). However, Gerber et al. (1992) argue that acquiring these elements does not guarantee people with learning disabilities will be successful in the workplace. In fact, others (Adelman & Vogel; Gerber et al., 1992; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002) found unsuccessful employees struggled because their strengths were misaligned with job responsibilities and they lacked support.

Most of the literature reviewed included samples both of men and women, although more men were sampled. In many cases, the data were not classified by gender. According to Stone (2005), "Men and women are differently situated vis-à-vis expectations regarding their social roles, and this difference generally leads to different life experiences" (p. 294). Other research studies identified how the individuals managed in the workplace generally, but such studies did not focus on the learning process in the workplace or experiences of learning new job tasks. Officer (2009) looked at the work and learning activities of people with a variety of disabilities in the workplace by

comparing their formal education and informal learning practices with the job requirements; however, the study excluded data primarily from a specific gender and disability. Overall, a common thread throughout the literature was the importance of support from family and friends, but there was little discussion on workplace support. Thus, there is strong evidence of the need to obtain more information on how employers can better support employees with learning disabilities.

Learning in Postsecondary Education

There is a large cluster of studies on students with learning disabilities compared to the smaller number of studies on adults with learning disabilities in the workplace (Westby, 2000). Yet, several educational institutions and workplaces share common goals in which they focus on developing skills of individuals and provide performance-oriented environments (Jørgensen, 2004; Tynjälä, 2008). In addition, both environments provide opportunities for success and potential for failure (Belenky et al., 1997; Tynjälä, 2008). Many students with learning disabilities successfully complete postsecondary education; however, their experiences often differ when they enter the workplace (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Madaus, 2008; Obi, 2004; Rothstein, 1998). According to Flannery (2000a), women connect to their own experience and follow their own familiarities; therefore, I felt it was important to review the learning experiences of people with learning disabilities in the education setting to better understand their learning experiences in the workplace.

Positive Influences to Learning

North America has taken steps to protect the rights of people with disabilities in the education systems. Certain laws provide equal opportunities to education for students

with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities (Obi, 2004; Rothstein, 1998). In fact, Obi (2004) notes that students receive preparation and academic support to transition from high school to college or university. Many colleges and universities have full-time faculty and staff to assist and support students diagnosed with a disability, and have integrated and developed procedures for accommodating these students (Field et al., 2003; Obi, 2004). A variety of supports and accommodation options are available to students, such as: priority registration, counseling and advocacy assistance, direct academic assistance in the form of tutoring, education on how to use learning strategies, design programs to strengthen weak academic skills, extra time allotted to complete test and assignments, and use of assistive technology (Foley, 2006; Obi, 2004; Rath & Royer, 2002). The developmental programs that are available consist of: campus tutorial/remedial, outreach programs, campus assistance centers, and/or off-campus instructions (Foley, 2006). Field et al. (2003) and Foley (2006) also contend that success of the students' learning can also be attributed to a strong support system from outside the school, such as that from family and friends, in which they find encouragement, comfort, and relaxation.

Field et al. (2003) conducted a U.S.-based study of 4 college students (1 female, 3 males) with learning disabilities to examine their perspectives on the college environment and self-determination. The study showed that students who were self-determined were more successful in achieving their academic goals. The interview responses indicated that support for self-determination in postsecondary settings is strongly influenced both by environmental as well as personality factors. The personality factors consist of the ability to accept responsibility for setting and achieving goals; to be resilient in

responding to failure; to problem solve in ways that take in account any disabilities; and to be persistent. The environmental factors include: the importance of disability awareness by faculty and staff; accessibility of instructors and small class sizes; nurturing and supportive environments; and having role models for successful behaviours. Field et al. found that the community college setting, compared to the university, was more nurturing with respect that it was supportive of students' self-esteem, had smaller class sizes, provided availability to more social support systems, and provided accessibility of instructors. Also, it reported the importance of students having the opportunity to set personal goals and make choices, and receive self-determination skill instruction and support so they could learn to take responsibility for themselves. Moreover, it further indicated that it is essential that institutions cultivate positive relationships, which can lead to greater self-determination.

Barriers to Learning

Foley (2006) and Obi (2004) reported that many students were unprepared for the transition from high school to posteducational settings in spite of meeting the academic requirements. Some high schools had difficulty developing effective transition programs from secondary to postsecondary education and, as a result, students were excluded from this development process (Field et al., 2003; Foley, 2006; Obi, 2004). Many students felt they lacked the knowledge of subject content, academics, or organizational skills (Obi, 2004). Foley (2006) maintains that academic responsibility primarily shifted to students, which resulted in frustration and failure.

Field et al. (2003) assert that parents who advocated for their children can no longer do so in the posteducation setting and consequently a number of students feel

unprepared to self-advocate. Foley (2006) indicates that in some cases, students receive less support in postsecondary education settings, which can affect their academic performance. Consequently, some students believe that they cannot become successful without the same support (Rath & Royer, 2002). Moreover, although there is legislation in place to provide equality for students with disabilities, the responsibility is primarily placed on students to self-identify and to provide the proper documentation of their disability or they are unlikely to receive appropriate accommodations (Field et al., 2003; Foley, 2006; Obi, 2004; Rothstein, 1998). As a result, Foley (2006) postulates that many students conceal their disability if they know support systems are unavailable. For example, Castellanos and Septeowski, (2004) and Field et al. (2003) argue that students hide their disability because of fear of stigmatization and embarrassment.

According to Gregg (2007), students with a low socioeconomic status face an array of barriers such as a lack of: academic skills, funds for testing, and support and confidence of faculty for successful transition to college or university. Obi (2004) supports this view, arguing that some of the successful programs that are designed to assist individuals with disabilities are no longer available due to lack of funding. Field et al. (2003) report that many students failed to meet their academic goals because of environmental factors that include withheld information (e.g., program requirements, university deadlines, and course selection) and negative behaviours of some instructors who tried to discourage these students from pursuing their academic goals based on their learning disabilities.

Russell and Demko (2004) conducted a study in Alberta of 142 students with disabilities (predominantly learning disabilities) to assess levels of accommodation. The

findings showed that students experienced variable transitional support from high school to postsecondary education, with the majority of respondents stating they lacked the support of guidance counselors and were unaware of the range of services and types of accommodations available to them. Participants also reported difficulty in completing required paperwork, which ultimately impacted funding opportunities.

The successes of students achieving academic goals were predominantly attributed to support and accommodations (Castellanos & Septeowski, 2004; Foley, 2006; Obi, 2004). For example, Rath and Royer (2002) contend that students were confident as learners when they had the tools they needed to learn more effectively; personality factors, such as self-determination, also played an important role.

Most school systems have more experience working with individuals with learning disabilities to reach their full potential and are more knowledgeable about issues concerning disabilities than the workplace; in spite of this, some students still face limitations in learning (Gregg, 2009; Madaus, 2008; Reiff, 1998). These limitations stem partly from educators being unaware of the challenges that students face. Consequently, assumptions are made that students are fully aware of their disability rights, their transition into postsecondary institutions is seamless, and that disclosure is easy. On the contrary, most times the opposite is true. The outcome of not receiving accommodations in the context of the postsecondary setting can lead students to drop out (Field et al., 2003). Similarly, these issues can surface in the workplace; therefore, further research of the barriers to learning is required to better understand the learning needs of individuals with learning disabilities.

Summary of Literature

This literature review provides the foundation related to this study on the learning experiences of women with learning disabilities in the workplace. First, I examined the challenges that women face with learning in the workplace. Second, I provided a definition and an overview of learning disabilities to fully understand the concept and then gave insight into women with learning disabilities' daily struggles. Third, I looked at the Canadian laws that are meant to protect individuals with learning disabilities and the issues the latter still endure with regards to accommodations and disclosure. Fourth, I investigated studies on experiences of individuals with learning disabilities to establish the influences to success in the workplace. Lastly, I looked at the learning experiences of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education in order to gain a better understanding of the influences of their learning.

Much of the literature emphasized the workplace as an important place to learn and develop skills that enable employees to become more successful (Billett, 2002; Fuller et al., 2004; Jackson, 2003; Kolb, 1984; Mojab & Gorman, 2003; Paloniemi, 2006; Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007). A few more critical studies (English, 2006; Fenwick, 2004; Hayes, 2000a; Jackson, 2003; Mojab & Gorman, 2003) found that gender and disability factors affected learning in the workplace, but were often ignored. These studies showed that women with disabilities often adhered to societal expectations, pressures, and norms to remain employed, especially with regards to disclosure which ultimately impacted the necessary accommodations for learning effectively (Dale, 2005; Dyck, 1996; Ferri & Gregg, 1998; Lingsom, 2008; Nosek et al., 2003; Ragins, 2008; Roman, 2009; Williams & Schutt Upadhyay, 2003). According to the Human Rights Commission's *2009 Annual*

Report, individuals with disabilities continue to face challenges. However, scant research has been conducted on women with learning disabilities with regards to their learning processes. This research attempts to fill this gap by going directly to affected women in order to allow them to describe their experiences, their concerns, and their challenges and successes associated with learning disabilities in the workplace. In order to do so, a qualitative, exploratory study is used.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

“We breathe, we think, we conceive of our lives as narratives”

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt (n.d.).

In this study, I used a qualitative narrative method to structure my research in order to explore and describe the workplace experiences of 6 women with diagnosed or suspected learning disabilities. This chapter discusses the study methodology and includes: the research design, the sample population, data collection procedures, data analysis, limitations, establishing trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

I used an exploratory qualitative narrative research methodology to explore the perspectives and reflections of 6 women with learning disabilities on their learning experiences in the workplace. A narrative approach enabled me to write using an exploratory voice rather than an omniscient, all-knowing voice. I wanted the participants to speak for themselves. I chose to do so because one of the compelling aspects of narrative work is that the persuasiveness of the stories or arguments presented may personally touch others, and result in changing their situation.

In formulating this inquiry, I have been guided by Clandinin and Connelly's description of stories. They write that “Stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived” (2000, p. 8). Narrative is a qualitative research method that is interpretive and it emphasizes the use of stories, which is based on the perspective of emphasizing lived experience (Bloom, 2002). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also suggest that “Life is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and

reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p. 17). Fundamentally, narrative fragments of family members, friends, classmates, coworkers, and media surround us.

Narrative as a story is the “process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them in order to make telling stories a meaning-making experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). As Seidman observes, “Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (p. 8). In other words, narratives provide meaning. In order to understand others we need to explore the meanings that make up their worlds (Smith & Sparke, 2008). Stories provide us with opportunities to gain knowledge and develop skills that become part of our learning processes. Individual life experiences are the primary source of data for narrative analysis (Bloom, 2002) and “narrative offers the potential to address ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity and dynamism of individual, group, and organizational phenomena” (Mitchell & Egugo, 2003, p. 5). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) delineate that what we know, we know subjectively and directly through experience, which in effect is comprised of “the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (p. 415). Therefore, retelling the stories of individuals can provide rich details and in-depth description (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2002b; Vidich & Lyman, 2000). Thus, I use a narrative approach to bring to light each participant’s life and unique experience and to give them a voice to express the challenges they may face in the workplace.

Sample Selection

A purposive sample was used in which, according to Creswell (2005), “the researcher intentionally selects people or sites who can best help us understand our phenomenon” (p. 203). As a strategy, it is suitable for “both individuals and groups” (p. 204); a sample in qualitative research “is selected on the purpose to yield the most information about the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2002a, p. 20). The study’s sample comprised 6 women of different ages who had a variety of suspected or diagnosed learning disabilities, work experiences (past or current), and educational backgrounds. The sample was deemed sufficient since it provided a wide range of experiences and offered a greater opportunity to understand how women with learning disabilities learn in the workplace. Merriam (2002b), states that “it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 12).

I recruited participants primarily from an employment resource centre in the Greater Toronto Area that specializes in assisting and supporting individuals with learning disabilities to find and to retain employment. This organization invited me to attend a staff meeting to discuss my research and the participants whom I was interested in recruiting, and also offered to assist in the recruitment process. An employment counselor was responsible for recruiting 5 of the 6 participants. The interested participants willingly volunteered and were comfortable with sharing their stories; they were not obligated to take part in the study.

An employment counselor notified me by telephone to inform me of participants who had granted me permission to contact them or I was contacted directly by the interested participants. One of the participants was recruited through a snowball effect

when a participant recommended her daughter for the study (the latter participant had also utilized the employment resource centre in the past). It is important to note that all of the participants were Caucasian and spoke English fluently.

Data Collection

I conducted one-on-one interviews in a face-to face format as the main procedure of collecting data. I created an interview guide (see Appendix A) that consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions to guide the discussion while providing opportunities to probe for clarity and additional information (Heck, 2006; Merriam, 2002b). The open-ended questions provided flexibility for participants to respond to and elaborate on the questions without any constraints (Creswell, 2008; Seidman, 2006). This type of interview allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' lives (Atkinson, 2007).

A pilot test of the interview guide was completed prior to conducting the interviews. The pilot test is "a procedure in which a researcher makes changes in an instrument based on feedback from a small number of individuals who complete and evaluate the instrument" (Creswell, 2008, p. 402). The interview guide was pilot tested with 2 individuals to assess the quality of the instrument. The pilot participants were selected based on the sample selection criteria described earlier. My initial intention was to have one pilot test; however, as the first two interviews occurred one after the other, I conducted two pilot tests. I asked both pilot participants to read the questions before the interviews were recorded. I used the second pilot interview to ensure that the results of the initial pilot test were consistent. Both pilot interviewees experienced no difficulties with the questions except the wording in one of the research questions was changed from *hinder your learning* to *prevent you from learning* after repeated clarification was

requested (see Appendix A, question 3ii). I used the words *prevent you from learning* during the actual recording. I made the change on the paper copies for the subsequent interview sessions. As a result of only one minor change being required to the interview guide, the interviews used for the testing were utilized in the data analysis.

The intent of my study was to understand how women with learning disabilities learn in the workplace. The questions were developed to explore their learning experiences and the factors that influenced their learning in order to identify steps that may improve workplace learning. The interview questions were as follows:

1. How would you describe your typical day in your workplace?
2. What does learning in the workplace mean to you?
3. How would you describe your learning experiences in the workplace?
4. What strategies do you use to support your own learning?
5. What has been your most successful learning experience in the workplace?
6. What has been your most challenging learning experience in the workplace?
7. If you could change anything about the way in which you learn at work, to make you become more successful, in the future, what would that be?

I gave the participants the choice of a date, time, and designated location for the interviews that provided privacy and safety. I conducted four of the six interviews in an empty office at the employment resource centre, a place where—as most of the participants revealed—their voices were heard in relation to their struggles in the workplace and with finding employment; fundamentally, they felt understood. I met one of the participants at a restaurant before conducting our formal interview at the centre. I held the other two interviews at the participants' homes.

I tried to keep in mind that the participants had learning disabilities and I was uncertain at the beginning about the nature of the disability; I suspected that verbal communication may not be the only form of communication. I also prepared information in writing (i.e., interview questions) to enable the women to read on their own. Each participant received the interview questions prior to the interview to ensure that she understood and felt comfortable with the types of questions to be asked; the questions were read aloud for individuals who were uncomfortable with reading. Most of the participants required a few minutes to review the questions. I provided a copy of the interview questions to each participant for referencing while the interviews were taking place. I asked the participants to choose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality to ensure their right to privacy (Seidman, 2006). I received permission from the participants to record their individual interview using a digital recorder in order to gather in-depth responses for this study. Audio recording provides the opportunity to transcribe spoken words into text, which gives an accurate account of the conversation (Creswell, 2008; Seidman, 2006). As Seidman states, “The participants’ thoughts become embodied in their words. To substitute the researcher’s paraphrasing or a summary of what the participants say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher’s consciousness for that of the participant” (p.114). The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 80 minutes in length.

I jotted down field notes during every session, and reviewed and summarized them after each session. I used the field notes for keeping track of key points, insights, trends, and my thoughts for reflection. According to Bogan and Biklen (1998), field notes are considered to be “the written account of what the researcher hears, sees,

experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (pp. 107-108). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also write that a field text is used to “assist memory to fill the richness, nuance, and intricacy of the lived stories” (p. 80). In addition, after each interview, I listened to the recordings of the interviews numerous times, while following the interview questions to make additional notes.

Data Analysis

In order to reconstruct the meaning of the women’s stories, a professional transcriber transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim, in their entirety. I read the raw data from the transcripts carefully and listened again to the recordings of the data several times. I did this to check for accuracy and to obtain information that related to each research question. I highlighted the passages of interest. According to Bogan and Biklen (1998), data is read to identify “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects, ways of thinking, and events [that] repeat and stand out” (p. 171). Also, I reviewed the field notes and the reflective notes that I made after the interviews and compared them against the transcripts to clarify any ambiguities and commonalities. I transferred the salient ideas onto another document to separate the data from the full transcript for each participant. As Seidman (2006) notes, “In reducing the material interviewers have begun to analyze, interpret, and make meaning of it” (p. 118). I then reviewed the condensed version of the transcripts and used a thematic analysis to code the data by mapping out key words and phrases. Coding in a thematic analysis is the process of finding concepts or themes that are in the recorded data or in the written transcripts (Ezzy, 2002). Thematic analysis involves the creation and application of “codes” to the data (Charmaz 2005, 2006). In this study, line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts involved close

reading and coding of discrete units of text using an intricate coding system developed using both inductive and deductive approaches; that is, the coding process was informed by the objectives of the research as well as the themes which emerged from the interview data. The main themes represented the participants' feelings and experiences surrounding disclosure, school, and the work environments. More specifically the importance of relationships emerged from their stories. In some cases, their stories touched upon topics such as the coping mechanisms and accommodations. I initially identified 12 subthemes and six key themes that were rearranged until I was satisfied that the concepts were similar enough to be grouped together. Four common themes were identified, which broadly related to the challenges and successes of learning in the workplace and the strategies that were used in negotiating in the workplace. Creswell (2008) states that "the identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences" (p. 521).

During this process, I reflected on how the stories of the women with learning disabilities related to my experiences as a learner. According to Seidman (2006), "Researchers must ask themselves what they have learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling them, crafting profiles, and organizing categories of excerpts" (p. 128). I will provide some of my reflections at the end of chapter 5.

Limitations

Not all pertinent factors that influence learning such as race, class, socioeconomic status, culture, ethnicity, language, knowledge of disability rights, sexuality, and roles and responsibilities outside the workplace were considered in-depth in this research. The

sample size was small and gender specific; therefore, the results provide a preliminary understanding about women with learning disabilities in the workplace. Also, the study focused solely on learning disabilities.

Time was a significant limitation. It was difficult to capture the entire work history of the participants in a short period of time; only a fraction of their experiences were disclosed. The first two interviews were scheduled directly one after the other, so I did not have the opportunity to make any direct changes to the interview guide or reflect on what worked well and what needed to be modified. In the future, I would schedule the interviews over a longer period of time so I could review the data collected and reflect on what worked well and what needed improvement. Noise distractions also may have been a limitation. I met with one of the participants in a restaurant and there was some rich discussion, but I was unable to record the conversation because of the background music. I made some notes and was able to connect some of the key points that were made during the formal interview, yet I was unable to capture the previous discussion in its entirety. I also heard noise from construction work while I interviewed the participants separately at their mutual home. At times we talked over the noise but this may have influenced their responses. During one of the interviews that I conducted in the employment resource centre, someone entered the office during the interview and the participant lost her train of thought; this participant had difficulties with memory, which might have interfered with her responses. As a result, I repeated the question.

Establishing Trustworthiness

The quality of the research is important to ensure that the narrative accounts are believed and trusted; therefore, the study used credibility to ensure trustworthiness

(Bloom, 2002). Credibility is the process of validating the findings. One of the study's strategies was the use of member checking, which involved the participants reviewing their data to ensure its accuracy (Merriam, 2002a). Most of the women in the study chose to have their individual transcripts sent to them either by mail or email and were given ample time to read it. After the initial interview was completed, one participant opted to listen to the recorded interview instead of receiving the printed version of the transcript, due to her reading limitations. In this case, I followed the printed transcript, while the participant listened to the recording for accuracy. I retrieved additional information by emails, telephone conversations, and/or by a face-to-face meeting. Additionally, direct quotations used in the study were taken from the transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning my research, I submitted an Application for Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants to the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB) and was subsequently granted permission to proceed with my research (see Appendix B for the clearance letter).

Once the potential participants were identified, I corresponded with them either by email or by phone. I arranged an individual face-to-face meeting to discuss the purpose of the study in greater detail and presented the letter of invitation to them, prior to the interview, because I was unsure about the participants' particular learning disabilities, especially those that might impact their reading. I wanted to ensure that the participants fully understood the purpose for my research, had the opportunity to ask any questions for clarity, and felt comfortable with the entire process. During each meeting, I provided the highlights from the letter of consent, which included: the interview process,

potential benefits and risks, confidentiality, voluntary participation, publication of results, contact information, and ethics clearance. I allowed each participant the choice to read it alone. One participant chose not to read the letter of consent in its entirety due to her disability but was satisfied with the information that I presented her verbally; the latter participant did keep the copy of the letter of consent.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

“None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the contexts of...events”

(Vivian Gussin Paley, 1990).

This chapter presents the study’s findings. It encompasses the stories of 6 women with learning disabilities who participated in the study. As noted in the previous chapter, I used semi-structured interview questions to gain rich insights from the participants’ experiences. Four themes emerged from and were guide by three main research questions: (a) What factors influence workplace learning for women with a learning disability? (b) What are the challenges and successes in learning in the workplace for women with a learning disability? (c) What strategies contribute to positive learning outcomes in the workplace for women with a learning disability?

I begin the chapter by introducing each participant (using pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity) in order to provide a frame of reference for understanding their workplace experiences and to provide an historical glimpse into their experiences living with learning disabilities. These women were of various ages and had different education levels, work experiences, and learning disabilities (e.g., working memory and visual spatial disorders). I then provide the details of each of the themes, followed by a summary of the findings.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study are mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and/or employees. The demographic details provided here are those that the participants highlighted in their interviews, which means that participants did not necessarily report

complete or comparable information. The 6 participants are introduced in the order they were interviewed.

Chloe

Chloe is in her late 40s; her parents suspected she had a disability at an early age but at that time she was never diagnosed. She attended a private school that specialized in assisting children with special needs in her native country in Europe. Chloe really enjoyed this school because the class size was small, other students had disabilities and learned at the same pace as she did, and the teachers accommodated her learning style. In contrast to the support Chloe received in private school, she was advised to drop out of college, in Canada, by a college faculty member after completing one semester. Without adequate support at college, she struggled to finish her program and discontinued her postsecondary education. Subsequently, Chloe entered the working world, holding many different positions that included stints as a part-time sales representative, filing clerk, data entry clerk, and receptionist. Although Chloe always believed she had a learning disability, it became more apparent with her struggles in the workplace. In the process of looking for a job, Chloe was referred to an employment support program specializing in helping individuals with learning disabilities, where she was identified with a short-term memory disorder that impacted her ability to work in particular environments.

Chloe describes her main priority as being a good mother but she finds it challenging to balance work life and family life with looking after her own needs. Chloe characterizes herself as being a hard worker who enjoys helping and interacting with people and who is always willing to learn. She also acknowledges that repetition helps

her retain information, which has a positive impact on her learning. At present, she hopes of securing a permanent and sustainable job.

Ashley

Ashley is in her early 20s and is Chloe's daughter. Chloe recognized that Ashley struggled with learning in kindergarten as a result of experiencing similar challenges herself. Ashley was diagnosed with a learning disability early in elementary school and her mother played a strong advocate role. Like her mother, Ashley was also diagnosed with a short-term memory disorder that makes it challenging to learn and retain information. She is able to remember bits of information but forgets it soon afterwards. Ashley was fortunate to have had a strong support system during her education. She appreciated that she was given the opportunity to get help when she needed it. As a result, Ashley successfully completed a college program at which point she was identified with a learning disability for a second time in order to receive support from the Disability Centre. After graduation, Ashley worked as a sales representative at a cosmetics counter for a major department store.

Ashley describes her learning style as "hands on" and notes that repetition helps minimize the assistance she requires. She believes her strengths include learning quickly, possessing good people skills, and being patient. Ashley remains hopeful that educating people with learning disabilities in the workplace will become mandatory and that management and staff will be forced to support people who need additional help.

Tracey

Tracey is in her early 40s and was diagnosed with a visual spatial learning disability, after being held back in kindergarten. This disorder makes computer use

challenging and Tracey finds it difficult to process information visually from the monitor. In other words, her eyes can see what is on the computer, but her brain has difficulty processing the visual information. Tracey also has a problem understanding the underlying meaning of jokes; she takes jokes personally.

After completing university, Tracey worked at nursing homes in various roles; however, she eventually left because she felt frustrated that her employers misunderstood her. With the help of an employment centre, Tracey was subsequently able to recognize that the jobs and work environments at the nursing homes were unsuitable for her because there were too many distractions. Eventually, she started volunteering as a support group facilitator for an organization that assisted individuals with developmental needs.

Tracey describes herself as having strong verbal communication skills and interpersonal skills. She also feels comfortable with hands-on learning and copes by writing things down.

Sophia

Sophia is in her mid-40s and found it challenging to learn at school, yet she was never formally diagnosed with a learning disability. Sophia struggles with reading and finds it difficult to process and comprehend information. Consequently, she considered herself a very low achiever at school; hence, did not put the effort into doing well with information-based courses that required reading, though she did well in theatre arts and gym. Although Sophia struggled in school, she was able to complete college with the assistance of accommodations but still felt she lacked certain skills to obtain specialized work and a high-paying job.

At the time of the interview, Sophia was unemployed but she had previously worked as a cashier, a retail sale associate, an artist, and more recently as an assistant in a “doggy daycare.” She describes herself as a hands-on learner and considers herself as having a good personality, being likable, adaptable, and gifted working with dogs. Sophia is courteous to her peers and enjoys being a team player. In the future, she hopes to work in a dog kennel or an animal clinic. Her ideal job entails working with pleasant people and being passionate about her job to the point where she can say that she loves it.

Suzie

Suzie is in her early 40s and was first diagnosed as having a working memory disorder in elementary school, which means she finds it difficult to process information in the moment but can recall information hours or days later. She struggles with step-by-step methods and has difficulty with spelling and reading.

Suzie describes herself as an “out of the box” thinker who prefers learning backwards, which means she needs to see the big picture first and then work towards understanding the finer details. This offers her several options to generate end results and enables her to develop different perspectives. However, she finds that many people are perplexed by her learning style because she is unable to learn in a sequential manner. Suzie further describes herself as having strong verbal communication, good interpersonal skills and a positive outlook on life.

Initially, Suzie’s parents did not react well to discovering she had a learning disability. While one parent denied her disability, the other used her disability to justify her failing grades. Even though Suzie faced much adversity at school, she managed to complete university. Afterwards, she had the opportunity to run a small business which

included sales, ordering supplies, and advertising. Suzie also held a position in a large corporation which involved pricing, advertising, and event planning.

Currently, Suzie is studying Social Services in college and was diagnosed with a learning disability for a second time in order to gain support. After graduating, she hopes to do everything possible to make sure that people who have been stigmatized by society are not forgotten. In the future, Suzie hopes to empower people who have been victimized by society.

Maudie

Maudie is in her mid-60s and was diagnosed with a learning disability in 2002 after struggling with assignments at college. She has difficulties with memory, especially retaining names and factual information. Maudie describes herself as an out-of-the-box thinker, which enables her to see the overall picture but at other times makes her struggle to see the end results.

As a young child, Maudie recognized that she learned differently compared to other children. She watched other children and observed how they would do certain things, and would then try it herself only to realize that she could not do what they did, especially when it involved memory. In Maudie's view, the other children were better at retaining information, especially names and spelling words. She would recall the details of children's appearances but was unable to remember their names. Maudie also found it difficult to keep the letters in the correct order when spelling words, even when the correctly spelled word was visible to her. Maudie developed various coping mechanisms such as drawing that helped her to communicate her message. As a result, she became a proficient verbal communicator and developed an extensive vocabulary at an early age.

Maudie's highest level of education is a college diploma. She held a variety of positions such as lead cashier, fashion model, artist, tour guide, facilitator, and yoga teacher.

Maudie also worked with a temp-agency doing different jobs and ran a few small businesses.

As a woman with a learning disability, Maudie feels that she has to work harder to get to the same place as other women without a learning disability, even though she believes having a learning disability is more of a gift than a detriment because she sees the world in a different way. Moreover, she had the opportunity to effectively advocate for her two sons who have learning disabilities and ensure that they received proper support at school. However, at times she feels overwhelmed by the dependency of her family.

Maudie's strengths include having strong interpersonal and verbal communication skills. She likes to help people and feels that she can communicate well with them at their level. Her dream jobs would be to work part-time with individuals with learning disabilities as an employment counselor, to teach yoga, and to produce more art.

Common Themes

Four main themes emerged from the data: (a) making sense of learning in the workplace; (b) the hidden disability dilemma—to disclose or not to disclose; (c) the work environment—facilitating or obstructing learning; and (d) surviving in the workplace. The themes include personal reflections and accounts of the stories told by the women participating in the study.

Making Sense of Learning in the Workplace

Learning in the workplace with a disability had different meanings for each of the participants. Understanding individual perspectives enabled me to better interpret the meanings of their experiences and to fully comprehend what conditions impacted their learning. Most of the participants talked about learning in the workplace as acquiring new knowledge and skills. It also involved learning how to determine who to trust for support and assistance, especially when there was no obvious support. Hence, it is not surprising that many of the women felt frustrated when workplace training failed to account for their individual learning style or failed to provide sufficient time to process information in order for them to comprehend and learn.

Most participants believe learning in the workplace involves learning something new. In particular, Chloe feels that it is important to be flexible as a learner and to acquire new knowledge every day. Suzie elaborates on the distinction between two meanings of learning:

One there is a learning that you do as an individual, in terms of you know what are your interactions with others, what is coming up, patterns that you can change, to learn and grow from. Typically, learning is you get into a job, and there is no training, and they can throw things at you, and they expect you to be up and running just as fast, as the person who has just left, and they don't tell you how to do the system, and usually what I tend to find is that if you are reporting to three people, three people have three different ways to have the same thing done, and you are kind of thrown in the fire, and go do it, and it is sink or swim.

For Suzie learning involved being self-directed and trying to decipher the truth from her coworkers. Fundamentally, she typically finds that information in training sessions is delivered in a didactic style, which differs from how she best learns. Suzie also spoke about how difficult it is when educators misunderstand her learning needs.

Consequently, she is belittled when she has difficulty following instructions precisely, which leaves her with unpleasant feelings.

Similarly, Tracey finds:

You always have to learn your new jobs. For me, I find it could be very stressful at times. Things are thrown at you, and they explain it once...usually, and it is like if you don't get it, tough nuggies.

This leaves inadequate time for Tracey to ask questions before a new topic is introduced. As a result, she struggles with processing and understanding the information in such a short time frame. Tracey describes learning at the nursing home:

It was learning the template. Very important...that was literally a crash course, 2 hours. I am being honest. The hands-on stuff, I didn't have too much problems with, because I am pretty good at putting a promo together. I am not too bad at that. Hands-on stuff I am great with. It is paper work, stats, reports, and meetings. Meetings, oh forget it. Forget it. The meetings would be 2 hours for me; I would be lost after 40 minutes, because there was too much information—information overload. It was too much being thrown at me, that I would have a lost look, but you know, they have to go on, because the meeting has to go on. So I use to write down things I didn't understand. Usually I would write down too much, and then I couldn't figure out what I am writing.

Although Tracey placed her needs to learn behind those of the organization and of others, there was little consideration with regards to her learning. The others were able to move on to complete their task while Tracey struggled to learn, which represent inequality. Consequently, Tracey blames herself for failing to acquire knowledge through these training processes. She also feels that having more time (e.g., a week instead of 3 days) for training would provide her the extra time she needs to process, interpret, and comprehend the information that is required of her to learn.

Ashley describes learning as being trained by someone when starting a new job. However, Ashley had inadequate training and insufficient time when she needed to learn her retail sales position which entailed being responsible for looking after two cosmetic counters; her learning was neglected. On-the-job training would help Ashley reinforce the fundamental skills and knowledge that she needs to become more familiar with her job expectations. Ashley reflected on this experience: “I know in the beginning it was tough because they did say they were going to train me, and then they didn’t, and I had to learn by asking people and doing it hands on.” Unfortunately, Ashley started her new job during a busy Christmas holiday season, without proper training, which made learning extremely challenging. It left her feeling betrayed.

Maudie shares her own workplace-learning experience:

Learning in the workplace for me, it is pay attention to others and what they do as well as what they say. Then I learned to ask if I don’t know or understand what is expected and always wrote down what is asked of me so I had guidelines to move forward, so I can do what is expected of me.

For Maudie, learning at work meant being aware of what was going on and developing her skills through acquiring new knowledge. Like Chloe, she also tried to learn something new every day.

The Hidden Disability Dilemma: To Disclose or Not to Disclose

All of the participants expressed disclosure as being difficult. For many of the participants, disclosure means revealing sensitive information about themselves to someone they can trust and feel comfortable with. Some participants feel that disclosure is critically important because it allows them opportunities to access assistance for their learning needs. However, the process of disclosure means participants have to weigh the potential benefits and risks (i.e., consequences) of exposing their inadequacies. For instance, disclosure either represents potential learning or potential job loss, or other serious implications. Many participants opt for nondisclosure, which means having the power to make that decision with the possibility of jeopardizing their learning opportunities as well as compromising their job performance. As a consequence, they often face negative reactions from colleagues and management about poor job performance. Following disclosure, many participants feel a gamut of emotions that impact their decision—fear about losing their job or about appearing to be abnormal, uncertainty about whether their needs will be met and about coworkers' reactions, or frustration about people misunderstanding the realities of living with a learning disability. Surprisingly, one of the participants feels safe about consistently disclosing because she has the tools to help her and she wants to be truthful about her abilities. The concealment strategies that most participants use develop over time and are based on childhood experiences during which they were discriminated against or labelled “dumb” or

“stupid,” especially when they were not learning at the same pace as their peers. These situations leave many participants feeling stigmatized, which forces them to keep their disability a secret and remain voiceless. As a result, the majority of these women are forced into silence to keep up with societal norms and to protect their self-esteem and self-image, which means they miss out on the assistance and support they require to enhance their learning.

Taking the risk to disclose.

About half of the participants chose to disclose with the intent of receiving accommodations to enable them to perform their jobs more effectively. However, there was an underlying sense of caution about disclosing; the women had no control over the outcome of disclosing.

Tracey is the only participant who voiced that she feels confident about continually asking for accommodations from her employer. She believes that learning disabilities are difficult to hide from an employer because, in time, low job performance will inevitably identify that there is a problem. In particular, Tracey fears her employer would fire her because of her disability. As a result, she strongly feels that it was important to keep a paper trail of the events that occur related to disclosure. The assumptions embedded in her fear-based approach imply that the requests documented “in writing” mean employers have to uphold the accommodation request and grant the assistance. As Tracey further explains:

I usually [disclosed] if I thought the job interview went well, I would say that at the end, or from the workshops [provided by the employment resource centre], they say you are suppose to disclose after you get the job. You are supposed to do

it within the first week, and you hope and pray, because by law they are not supposed to fire [you]....[The employer] may not like it, but we usually have something written. ...I disclosed that, and even before you disclosed, you have this written paper, because verbal is great, but unless you have it written, they are not going to give you accommodations.

Tracey received training from the employment centre that provided her with the knowledge and understanding about her individual rights, which made her feel more confident in such workplace situations. The employment centre also assisted Tracey with preparing a template that describes her particular disability and how it impacts her and her job. The template is used to help Tracey to initiate a conversation about how to disclose, which makes it easier for her to disclose. In particular, Tracey informs her employer that she needs a job coach from the centre, which is at no expense to the employer (the job coach acts like a mediator between the employer and Tracey; the job coach provides Tracey with on the job assistance by obtaining the information with regards to her job responsibilities from the employer and then explains it to her). Afterwards, Tracey gives her employer a card with the contact information for the job coach to advise the manager to get in contact with the coach. This intermediary step proved to be an excellent support in facilitating Tracey's learning.

In contrast, Chloe attempted to partially disclose on one occasion. She informed her sister-in-law about her learning challenges before starting a new job at the same company. Chloe felt more comfortable with her sister-in-law knowing; in a way, her sister-in-law acted as a buffer between her and her employer. As a result, she not only received the job, but also received appropriate accommodations to help her learn.

Similarly, Sophia also disclosed to her boss. She recalled when it happened: “I...sort of gave her clues, in a sense, tell her, I said to her, ‘I am a bit slower, and you have to explain.’” Sophia anticipated that her supervisor would be more compassionate.

Unfortunately, it did not work out in Sophia’s favour because she was eventually released without the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills that she needed to perform her job. However, the other two employees who were hired at the same time continued to work. After making the decision to disclose, Sophia feels that she took a big risk and that her former employer believed the company made a mistake in hiring her.

Protecting self-image and self-esteem—avoiding disclosure.

Most of the participants felt that there is a lack of understanding or knowledge about learning disabilities, which makes workplaces uncertain places where it is risky to disclose; therefore, it is difficult to deal with the struggles of having a learning disability and the reaction of others regarding learning disabilities. At times, it seemed easier for the participants to remain silent to avoid losing their self-image and self-esteem and face their barriers of learning than to fight to be understood, which was predominately based on past experiences. It was also important for these women to maintain their social identity.

Although Tracey feels confident in disclosing her disability in the workplace, she still feels that there is a lack of knowledge from people in general regarding hidden disabilities—physical or mental impairments that are not apparent to others, such as a learning disability. As Tracey shared,

A lot of people still...don’t know what hidden disabilities are. I don’t even think they know what learning challenges are in the workplace out there. I don’t know if they have ever heard the term, or they hear it, and they [are] still in denial. I really

believe employers, managers, anybody in businesses have to become more aware of what a learning disability is, whether you are a woman or a man... learning disabilities is a very broad concept, and it is not the same for the next person.

Tracey also believes that many people are skeptical about learning disabilities because they are invisible, unlike other more visible disabilities. As she reports:

[Our disability] is invisible. You don't see it. I am not wearing glasses. I don't have a t-shirt on that says I have a learning disability. You look like everybody in the room, like your look is the same, right. You don't stand out, as if you are in a wheelchair, or with a walker, or you have a cane, or a hearing aid, or Braille, or stuff like that. So it is very different than people who have handicaps, and they may not believe you.

Maudie shares similar thoughts:

We don't tend to talk about [learning disabilities], and most employers don't even know what it is. Oh yes, some even think that being learning disabled is being mentally retarded. Some like my mother think people with learning disabilities are stupid.

Maudie's past experiences of living with a learning disability meant negotiating contradictory feelings at times. On one hand, her mother thought she was beautiful, but at the same time thought she was unintelligent. As Maudie recalls,

I had a mother who thought her daughter was the ideal little girl. The blonde, pretty little thing...but she had always asked me when I came home from school with my report cards, in hand, "Why are you so stupid." She said, "You seem so smart, but you are so stupid! Why would you do so poorly on your report card results?"

Compounding her family experiences, Maudie had difficult school experiences, which resulted in her feeling humiliated. Maudie describes an experience that she had with a high school teacher:

It happened when I was in Grade 9. At that time, they were still teaching spelling as a subject in our particular school catchment area where I lived. It was our final exam...I wrote the spelling exam... [The teacher] then said, "I decided this time to read out the results, once I've got them." So [the teacher] did. [The teacher] said, "I want everyone who is below 50 to stand up." [The teacher] read out [the] list. [The teacher] then said, "Anyone that is below 40 will have to come and stand at the front of the class for the rest of the time here." I was so embarrassed standing at the front of the class with all our classmates watching. I wished I could have died. Just standing there, I remember shaking, I wanted to cry, but there was no way I was going to let tears flow because I knew darn well that [the teacher wanted me to. [The teacher] introduced me. [The teacher] made it a big production. "Look at this young girl, she got below 40!! You'd think after me teaching her all year, with my efforts, she would have done better than that!"

This was a great struggle for Maudie because it impacted her self-esteem and it has taken her a long time to recover from the realization that she is not stupid. Comparatively, Suzy feels uncomfortable disclosing because of how society portrays individuals with learning disabilities. She feels that there is a stigma surrounding learning disabilities and feels that if she decides to disclose she will lose her opportunity to be hired for a job:

I find that a lot of people are very close[d] minded and they don't have the time, and they don't have the patience, and they don't want to learn, and to them it is

just too much, and when I go into work, I don't say anything, because it is a stigma, it is not a thing to say, and I know the 10 times that you have said it, you wouldn't be hired.

To compensate for this approach, Suzie does not take notes in front of anyone because she feels that it shows a sign of weakness, since no one else takes notes. She copes by trying to remember a few key points and then writes them down when she returns to her desk. Some of her beliefs and subsequent ways of coping are developed from her experiences in elementary school where she was segregated from her classmates:

When I went to public school, they used to have those universal tests that they gave every year, so you fill them out in Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3. Of course I failed them all. So I remember doing reading comprehension, I think it was like Grade 2 or 3, and they had them colour coded depending on how smart you were, and I can tell you that there were three of us that worked together. Three of us for I don't know how many years,...right down at the bottom.... they tried to take us out of class, it was a few times a week, to go to the library, but then we did nothing at the library.

At that time, Suzie felt frustrated because she was too young to express her challenges and because few people understood the concept of learning disabilities. Therefore, Suzy remained silent.

Chloe also encounters frustration at work because people in the workplace do not understand her learning challenges. Chloe recalled a negative experience:

There was a job where I was at...I did enjoy it, but there was some computer work involved, and I would make some mistakes. ...I heard a comment...she is the dumbest tool in the shed...but they didn't know about my learning disability. That remark deflated Chloe's self-esteem and as a result, made it difficult for her to disclose her learning disability. She prefers not discuss it.

Ashley is afraid to disclose because she fears losing her job. She was typically silent during her probationary period because she felt that she had to prove her worth to her employer despite wanting to ask questions during this time. Ashley was more afraid of the consequences of revealing herself as incapable of performing her job duties; there was the potential that she could have been terminated. She elaborates:

They make it into a big deal. ...Especially if you want to tell someone [about having a learning disability] right off the bat. It will be like, "this person doesn't learn quickly enough. ...Why should we hire her? Why should we have them?"...They might look at you differently too. That is a lot to think about, like they may let you go, because you can't learn quickly, because they want you to multitask all the time, do this...this...this all at one time...if she can't do that, then there is no point in hiring her.

Ashley feels that it is a gamble to inform an employer during the interview stages because the latter may feel that hiring someone with a learning disability may prove to be a liability rather than a benefit.

Chloe, Suzie, and Maudie believe that people are unable to provide support or accommodation if they are unaware of individual needs. Maudie shares her thoughts on nondisclosure:

People such as me, who have learning disabilities, are always striving to even get oneself to the mark. But the mark we set for ourselves is usually unattainable because we are comparing ourselves to everybody else. We shouldn't do that. I find what is really lacking is the fact that we don't tell them that. The problem being is...most of the time is that somebody else is doing it for us.

Maudie believes people with learning disabilities struggle to adhere to societal norms and as a result find it hard to accept themselves for who they are; therefore, they tend to lose out on opportunities to learn.

However Chloe feels disclosure means communicating her need for gaining accommodation for her learning difficulties, even though there are no guarantees that her needs would be met, which represents a fear of the unknown. Both Ashley and Suzie are willing to disclose if they trust that people are knowledgeable about learning disabilities. In such cases, Ashley feels that disclosing would be less difficult, while Suzie feels she would be less hesitant in disclosing if it made her job easier.

The Work Environment: Facilitating or Obstructing Learning

The work environment plays a critical role in fostering or constraining learning. Participants described social and work-condition factors as elements that influence learning. The social factors involve the interpersonal relationships that participants develop among coworkers and management. Such factors allow people in the workplace to work collaboratively to construct knowledge and skills. Work conditions include the physical aspect, which consists of structural elements such as physical layout and noise levels in the work environment that impact what participants hear, see, and touch (Clements-Croome, 2006). Work conditions also includes the pace, structure, and

volume of work (i.e., workload). Moreover, the participants discussed restrictive and expansive conditions in their workplaces that impact their learning. When work environments are restrictive, most participants report they have fewer learning opportunities available to them due to lack of support and respect, distractions, time constraints, and heavy workloads. Therefore, they feel left out, pressured, and frustrated. On the other hand, when work environments are expansive (which are more nurturing and flexible in nature), many participants state they are able to achieve their highest potential by building harmonious relationships, experiencing physical comfort, and learning and working at their own pace. As a result they feel safe, valued, appreciated, empowered, and have a sense of belonging.

Interpersonal work relationships.

Interpersonal work relationships have significant impacts on the women's learning experiences, development, and success. Firstly, all of the women expressed the need for a strong support system from management and coworkers because they depend heavily on asking questions in order to clarify, comprehend, and gain greater understanding. Most participants rely on the knowledge, skills, and experiences of those who know the job in order to manage in the workplace. Secondly, positive interactions at work make the majority of women feel more in control because they are involved in their learning. Also, they feel respected because their voices are heard, their questions are answered, their goals are reached, and their job tasks are completed. Most importantly, relationships boost self-esteem, which help the women to overcome workplace learning challenges. Yet, the majority of women in this study experience poor relationships at work that impact their self-esteem and make it difficult for them to achieve their highest

potential. A few of the participants feel powerless and incompetent because they are unable to handle the work pressures. Some of the participants feel mistreated because they are not given equal opportunities and some feel frustrated because they do not receive the support they need to acquire new knowledge and skills to succeed on the job.

Positive relationships—A sense of connectedness at work.

Positive work relationships are important because they allow women to experience equal power relations and to feel confident and connected to the organization and the people they work with, which makes them feel accepted. Also, it is an opportunity for the women to use their voices to readily receive the support and assistance they need to enhance their quality of learning. Most participants feel they have a better chance of being able to ask their fellow workers questions after building a rapport. For example, Chloe felt valued by her colleagues as a result of the relationship that she had developed with them. She shared a story that elaborated on the importance of relationships:

It was one of the jobs that I truly felt comfortable in [and] that was...suited for me. ...It was like family oriented, ...although everybody wasn't family members, ... you felt like you were part of....I knew I was doing well, there were people around, they would help me, so they would help me no matter [what]...my friend would help me, my sister-in-law would help me. It was like, the people around me, they were willing to help me...if I wasn't sure about something, they were there to just kind of guide me, I don't know, I just felt right.

Chloe really enjoyed her job and felt successful when she received the help and support she needed; fundamentally, the organization took her learning in consideration.

Furthermore, she had a good manager; her boss was kind. Similarly, the organization that Tracey volunteers for, which assists individuals with developmental disabilities, makes her feel valued:

They accept you for who you are, and they are great people. You know, you can do the smallest thing like, I don't know, explain a simple sentence, and they will thank you, umpteen times during the day. So I find it, because they have a challenge, and I have a challenge, it kind of makes me feel better. Basically we are learning from each other. So I like it a lot.

Because Tracey feels valued and shares commonalities with the clients, it helps her to learn. While working at the nursing homes, Tracey received help from her colleagues to complete special events such as Valentine's Day, which made the events successful.

Suzie also feels building positive relationships and collaborating with coworkers helps her to learn more effectively; as she reports:

Once I figure out the whole picture, and work backwards and figure out how things need to get done, then from there I am able to set up systems that work for me, and from that too I sort of figure out.... Department A deal[s] with, I know that there is one company that we had to keep submitting receipts and invoices, and they would call back, and it was part of the team thing, and that was part of what I was coordinating. I would eventually get to know the one person in that office, and so therefore what I would start to do is build bridges, so I knew whoever it was in that office, you could call, and say hi to them, and say I got this, can you help me, and he was in this office. So I loved to build bridges, and to create that kind of relationship, so that things are made that much easier.

By building bridges, Suzie understands where everyone fits in and is then able to meet the end goals. Most importantly, she builds relationships with people who she trusts will get the job done. Relative to Suzie's encounter, Maudie describes her experience of working as a facilitator for adults with learning disabilities:

My job was to be the monitor and guide who would listen to what was said and draw attention to it if I felt it was pertinent. I added to our discussions by saying, such things as, "Okay, do you agree with this point of view, if not what do you think or what do you find as a problematic for you?" Next I would ask group members to write or verbalize their point of view or to speak to me at our break. I did this as I wanted them to be anonymous, if they so wished. Then I would read out each slip. "Okay, we all listened to this very carefully, and then I'd like if you can to come up with an answer as a group as to how we can cope with these problems." Everyone joined in. As the discussion continued I could usually see a glow on the face of a person who might have written one of the questions. By doing this, group members were helping each other to find answers to the problems presented. Our group gave each of them a chance to experience, discuss, and resolve some of their own problems. It also encouraged trust in fellow members and themselves. This method also encouraged members to have more empathy and see much deeper into those problems than most people could.

The relationship Maudie formed among group members allowed everyone to contribute through building trust by hearing different perspectives, and finding resolutions.

Maudie strongly believes that if she works independently, she will be at a loss because she will be unable to ask questions. It will make her feel isolated and very unhappy. She further states:

I like work to be interactive, so that if I really do have a question, I can find someone to ask, because I am an asker. You know, I am not somebody that just charges ahead, and does it, and then finds out that it is wrong. I would much rather ask, and what parameters there are that I should be doing.

Maudie was also fortunate to have had an open relationship with her boss who knew that she was going through difficult times; in particular, her daughter had cancer. As a result, she was able to cope with her challenges of learning more effectively.

Suzie also finds that when she asks questions to clarify information, her inquiry will often benefit the organization because it will lead to novel ideas and solutions, such as eliminating steps in processes. As a result, Suzie is able to find more ways of being efficient. In this case, asking questions benefits both the individual and the organization; in essence, asking questions becomes another way of team building.

Poor relationships—A sense of powerlessness at work.

When participants face poor relationships with their boss and colleagues, the conditions for learning are more challenging. As a result, most of the women felt powerless and lost when their learning was not being considered and they recognized that the use of their voice would not give them the power to make changes that would fulfill their learning needs, unlike their managers and colleagues. For example, Sophia felt that her manager at the doggy daycare treated her unfairly compared to the other staff,

particularly because she had as much seniority as the other staff members. Sophia recalls when she received feedback on her job performance:

My boss sometimes would see me on camera, and then send somebody else down to tell me. It use[d] to aggravate me, so she would be second hand, and then I couldn't handle that the other girl had a higher up, when we were both hired around the same time, and she was giving me direction. So first I took ...like who is this person, she has the same experience as me, and she is giving me direction, so I told my boss, it is hard to take direction from somebody who is at the same level as me.

This left a power imbalance between Sophia and her colleagues; her colleagues had more power than she did, which made Sophia feel inferior. Sophia would have preferred to receive feedback directly from her boss. Overall, she did not feel connected with her supervisor, and she thus lost the opportunity to develop her skills at this particular place of employment.

Chloe feels pressured about not finishing job tasks as quickly as expected. She recalled when her boss would sometimes ask her, "Aren't you done yet?" During her performance review, Chloe remembers her boss saying: "I know there is something wrong. There is something that is not quite right, but I can't put my finger on it." However, her manager simply left things the same, leaving Chloe without the chance to grow and develop. Her development was neglected. As a result, Chloe remained silent; she did not know what to say although she knew what the problem was. Suzie, in turn, shares her story about her former boss who refused to promote her:

When I worked at a large corporation, I had a boss that loved to destroy people that worked underneath her, and [my manager] played upon those that I guess she deemed weak, and in that corporation, I certainly went above and beyond for any of the teams that I worked on. They recognized it. They used to put that in my performance evaluations. [My boss] however didn't want to let me [move] up every time that they kept saying, you will go up to the next level, go do this, you should be up there, why are you here. Because you know in some way, it looked good on her that she had someone that did their job that helped those other teams...anything that [my boss] could distort, to keep me where she was, she did ... [My manager] literally sucked the life out of me.

It was evident to Suzie and others that she had the skills to advance but her manager held her back, using unfair power to Suzie's disadvantage. Suzie was able to overcome these challenges and learn from them by making sure she takes notice of the management styles of others. She does not want to be under a manager who is controlling and prevents her from developing. Furthermore, Suzie has noted that a lot of organizations and managers she has worked for disliked when she asked questions but she likes to do so in order to get clarification.

In contrast Maudie worked for a boss who had different cultural values that presented men as dominant, powerful, and in control and perceived women as subordinate and inferior to men. Maudie recalls an incident that occurred when she worked in a mechanic shop:

There was the issue that I was a blond haired, blue eyed woman with white skin, telling [customers] that they better pay their bills or else. When they didn't, I told

each of them I'd be coming after you! Many thought I was joking, so I had to make an example of several of them. Otherwise I would have lost total control of the money owed to the garage. To this end, I used what is called a "Mechanic's Lien." A mechanic has the right to take a tow truck, and find the vehicle of the owner who owes the garage money. Mechanics can just take that vehicle, and lock it up in their garage until the vehicle owner or debtor pays the money they owed. So that's what I did! It certainly just dumbfounded them. The owner I am speaking of said, "How dare you." And I said, "I have got all the legal sides on my side." Their answer was, "Well, I will slap you." I said, "If you do, I will be on that phone so fast, that you won't know which way your head is spinning. The police will be here in two seconds and you my friend will be arrested and charged under the Federal Criminal Code with assault." It was frightening in one way, but ... it help build up my ego.

It was challenging for Maudie to deal with men who disrespected women, especially when her voice was not being heard. Eventually, she was able to overcome the cultural differences by learning more about the culture and finding commonalities with her boss and the customers.

Tracey and Ashley also experienced challenges with their fellow workers. Tracey had colleagues who helped her when she needed things to be explained to her, which worked out to be similar to a buddy system. One of the staff buddies would help Tracey, but did not understand her learning challenges; therefore, her colleague would get frustrated and her learning was neglected. Ashley struggles with the lack of supports at work as compared to the assistance she is used to receiving at school. At school, she

constantly received help and was always able to ask questions if she was unsure, which was contrary to her experiences at work. She expresses her feelings about the transition from school to work:

I found it hard because in college or high school, I knew that in the back of my head, there was always a place that you could go to for help, and in the work place it would make you kind of anxious, because there is nowhere to go, it is like, who can you talk to? It is just building and building. ...So it is a hard transition. You have help, and then you don't, so it is like the total opposite.

There was no preparation for this transition.

It was difficult for Ashley to find a job but it was equally difficult not to receive any help once she got a job.

The work conditions influence—Participation and control.

Many of the women find it difficult to concentrate when work conditions have cramped layouts, noisy surroundings, heavy workloads, and fast-paced environments because it interferes with their ability to concentrate, especially to learn new tasks and to perform their job tasks successfully. Also, these conditions often interfered with their well-being and their life outside of the workplace. There was little opportunity to exercise any choice or control over work conditions; generally, the employer had the power to make those changes. Consequently, participants describe these workplace conditions as frustrating. On the contrary, work conditions that facilitate the women's learning and give them the opportunity to make decisions on their work conditions also give them autonomy, confidence, empowerment, and work satisfaction, and make them feel valued.

Chloe, Ashley, Tracey, and Sophia all find that busy work environments interfere with their learning. Chloe finds fast-paced workplaces impact her efforts to do a good job as they make it difficult for her to perform on a consistent level. Chloe recalls a time when she worked in a busy environment:

When I went back from maternity leave, after my second daughter was born ...there were times of the year... it was fast paced, and it was just that that job didn't work out for me...it was a difficult time. One was a constant stress of being busy, busy, and summer when you pay the taxes...and I know people can accomplish that, but it was...my concentration, that affected me.

It was especially difficult for Chloe because she did not want to go back to work after having her second child; she wanted to stay home. It was a struggle for her to keep up with the demands of being a mother, to meet the demands of a fast-paced environment, and to live with the challenges of having a learning disability. Ashley prefers a slower-paced work environment because it provides her more time and space to fully understand her job expectations so she can perform at her full potential.

Similarly, Sophia requires a lot of time to process information. It is difficult for her to process a lot of information at one time. She often questions what is wrong with her in particular when she recognizes that others around her get information that she misses. Sophia describes work environments that are conducive to her learning:

I worked in a hardware store, a family sort of lumber/hardware type of store, and I guess... since it is family they are more lenient, and I guess they would have to repeat things over again to me. I was lucky to have the luxury to have a slower process of learning some stuff.

Sophia also describes experiences that she had where work environments restricted her learning:

I was trying to work for [a pet supply and service store] and they wanted me to get the test. I had to do a test, and they wanted me to get 100%, and I got I think 85%, and then I had to redo, and then again I got irritated ...I had to do the multiple choice, people were [walking] in and out of the room, while I was doing the test. ...I was sort of frustrated, and I don't know how long they gave me going through this, and I didn't end up [getting the job], she told me that I am not the right fit.

In the latter situation, Sophia's learning was not considered at all.

Similarly, Tracey finds fast paced environments with heavy workloads and small working spaces very restrictive:

Busy; dizzy; too many people—coming and going. Distractions. The noise. The noise used to irritate me. You know when you are doing your reports. There was a room like this [the room was suitable for two people comfortably]. You had three people coming in, and two computers, and they are in and out, and they are eating, and you hear the noise, and the door is banging, and they are talking, and the radio is on. You know, I am like, I can't function. I just can't function. It is great for everybody, but for me, I lost my train of thought. ...But the nursing home is too much. You have the person coming in to clean, and then you have the person washing the floor, and I am like, "hey, can't you guys just... go away." So that is not good for me.

Tracey had little control over her heavy workload and work conditions and became overwhelmed; these conditions did not allow her enough time to eat or to take breaks.

This brought on anxiety and panic attacks and, as a result, Tracey would lose her train of thought. It also interfered with Tracey's personal time and well-being; without breaks, she had no time for herself and without food she did not have the proper nourishment to fully function. Tracey is currently volunteering in her desired work environment. The atmosphere is relaxed, spacious, and quiet; the group is smaller, there is less paperwork with fewer distractions.

Suzie tends to learn in environments that allow her autonomy and independence. She describes her experiences of managing a small business:

What I liked about that job was that I had the autonomy and the authority to come in and do things, and they were okay that I could set things up the ways that worked for me. So I was able to set up systems, and ...when I wasn't on the computer, that I had face to face contact with other people, and I really, really enjoyed that, and if I had questions or if I wanted to change something or add something, or do something, they were very open to kind of letting me do my thing.

Suzie dislikes working in a structured environment with a manager who micromanages and consistently gives negative feedback. She has strong verbal communication skills but her learning disability affects her written communication skills (e.g., vocabulary, spelling) which make her a target for destructive criticism. Suzie feels being micromanaged with step-by-step instructions restricts her comprehension because it prevents her from seeing the "big picture" and leaves her very little opportunity to step back and process the information. Suzie further states:

People didn't really do what the job was supposed to do. So not only were you doing your job, you were doing other people's jobs, and people would hide

behind all the processes, just goes from A to B... it is frustrating because with my learning disabilities, I always have to be outside the box, and everything usually is step [by step]. ...It is very hard to find someone who understands that. There is more than one way to get to the results.

Overall, the work conditions play an important role in the learning of participants because it impacts the way in which the women learn and process information.

Need for support and understanding.

All of the participants made comments on the importance of supportive and understanding work environments. Suzie describes such an environment:

One where they are supportive and understanding, and understand too that, okay, I may write the reports the way you want, or may not, but work with the style that I work with. ...I like a supportive environment, because what I tend to find is that I love to support other people, so if someone else has an issue or a problem with what they are doing, I don't care whether it is my job or not, or it is not even what I'm supposed to be doing, if they need help, then I want to go help them.

In this case, Suzie describes the need to bounce ideas off others and to have the freedom to implement her suggestions accordingly. Suzie explains that being taught in various ways is critical for her to learn and she believes the characteristic of an accommodating person is an educator who is compassionate, patient, and understanding.

Maudie shared similar thoughts. She notes, "Because of my learning problem, I tend to see the whole picture, but sometimes I have difficulty seeing the target. So I really have to make sure and check with somebody else, what the target is." As a result, Maudie needs help from others to reach her set goals. Sophia also describes an

accommodating person as someone who is good natured, calm, reassuring, and provides her with a safe place to ask questions when she is stuck.

Ashley also identifies having patience as a necessary characteristic in order to provide her a safe place for her to freely ask questions. She says that having someone who is experienced and willing to help boosts her self-esteem. Ashley describes her current manager:

Right now I have a counter manager. She is very nice, so if I have any questions, I can always go to her, and she will coach me on things. She is more experienced in the field, than I am, so I feel like she understands more, and I can go to her to explain things.

Chloe and Tracey also feel that having enough time is important. Chloe shares a time when she was accommodated:

When I went in there and I knew some part of the job description. When I went in, they took some out, to maybe accommodate me more...and then later on I took a little bit more duties to help somebody else out, because they were...doing way too much. Just a few things, so I felt comfortable in the work setting, because I was a receptionist. ...I enjoy people, talking to people, and...I liked everyone, and everyone liked me, I don't know, it was the best job I ever had, that I really enjoyed. ...I did enjoy the others, but somehow this was my top favourite one.

Tracey describes feeling comfortable in the workplace when her learning challenges are understood and information is explained to her in simple sentences. In fact, Tracey believes a “job coach” is a great asset for her in the workplace. Tracey recalls when she had a job coach:

I did have a developer job coach, who would come in, learn everything, the employer would basically explain the template, and the programs, and the computer stuff. I needed it. I needed it for the computer. I needed somebody to explain that to me, and then he would explain it, and then during the week, other things would pop up, and then I would have to tell them, or sometimes I would freak, and then they usually come, I think in the beginning, they are there for 3 months, the first month three times a week, and then they slowly wean you off right, and I think what happened to me was when I got slowly weaned off, I got frantic, but I knew it was coming, because I can't be there forever, you know, but I probably got that way because I wasn't happy in that setting. ...I didn't have confidence in myself.

Tracey had the coach for about 3 months and after the time period ended she was on her own, which made it very hard for her and she lost confidence in herself. She is aware that they can be expensive if she has to obtain one independently. Tracey tries to work without a job coach but she really struggles. In essence, having more support and understanding give the women more opportunity to boost their self-esteem and feel more empowered.

Surviving in the Workplace: Coping Mechanisms

As Maudie summarily observes, "If you can find a way to cope with a particular problem then you can conquer it." All of the women in the study learned to develop independent problem-solving strategies to adapt to their workplace and to learn more effectively. A few participants developed coping mechanisms that enhance their learning process, such as writing things down and taking their own time and space to understand

information, and they often disguised their learning disabilities to preserve their self-image. On the other hand, some create avoidance and rationalizing strategies to cope, which provide temporary solutions to their learning challenges. However, in every case, participants developed personal philosophies that enable them to build their self-confidence and empower themselves to continue to find ways to learn and grow. Moreover, such personal philosophies give each participant the opportunity to make her own decision on what works best, which gives her a sense of control over mastering job tasks.

Avoidance.

Avoidance is a coping strategy that is used by some of the participants. When participants are in situations where their learning is constrained, they avoid it. As Sophia recalls:

Working in the lumber store, there may have been different areas that I may have avoided. I knew how to write up bills. I took some information, maybe some areas I just...had to prepare, write up how to make up a deck, or what the products that they would need to, I kind of didn't go to that level in learning. ... They were looking for expertise. I felt like all I could do was just be at the cash register, work on the cash, take the money, or be on the phone, answer, and then pass the calls to the other people that had the knowledge. But it would have been more learning and again that could be something I am totally not interested in, that I don't care. I am not strong enough to go to that level.

Sophia was allowed to avoid doing or learning certain tasks because of the freedom she had when she worked in the family business. She compares this learning experience to

the experiences of people learning the bare essentials to communicate a new language. In essence, Sophia learns what she has to in order to perform her job responsibilities and she completes tasks that she feels comfortable with and passes uncomfortable tasks to someone she feels is a subject matter expert. When given the opportunity to learn more about the products, Sophia chose not to. In relation to Sophia, Suzie admits:

There are ways around it, and if there is something one has to do, then one has to do it, that is what I am going to do, but I tend to find at this stage that the things that I am crappy at, I really stay away from.

Suzie explains she finds other ways of getting her work completed without having to do it herself. Suzie substitutes her weaknesses with someone else's strengths, without anyone being aware that she has a learning disability. Tracey also uses this reciprocating strategy. In other words, Sophia, Suzie, and Tracey depend on their own strengths and those of their coworkers to avoid tackling tasks with which they struggle. Tracey provides an example:

I use to volunteer. ...I really like animals, so I would go to the birdcages or fish, or whatever, because a lot of people didn't like doing that, but to me that was nothing. It wasn't a big chore, because I like the animals, so in way, it was an hour away from the paper work, it kind of gave me an outing, to get me away from thinking about the paper work, that I am totally involved with. ...So then I could go back and I also felt refreshed doing that. So that I would say would be a strength....[I can] take [my strength] anywhere [I] go, if there is an animal, or whatever, and say "you know what, I will do the cages, if like let's say, you write the activities out on the blackboard, which I am not good at." So it is kind of like

you are sharing, you know. Like you are [aren't] not doing the job. You are, but it is like I am not good at writing on the blackboard. I was never good at writing on the blackboard. We are reciprocating, which works out quite well. I can't write on the blackboard. It goes crooked, even with straight lines, and the managers didn't understand that. They didn't get it. They told me to use a ruler, and then they had those things, what are they called, you trace the letters. ...I said, "You know that will take me 2 hours...when I could do something [to] use my strength instead of my weakness." So that did work. That came in handy.

In essence, this mechanism is a form of team building. Although, the participants are unable to acquire new skills, they are able to learn ways of working collaboratively.

Writing things down.

Most participants write things down to retain information. For example, both Chloe and Maudie write down information pertaining to their job responsibilities to ensure they retain important information. Maudie reports:

When I start a new job, I ask what the expectations are for me. Those expectations become my targets and then I sit down and...make a plan of how I will reach them. Then I write down my plan and usually paste it to the top of my desk, so that I have it in front of me all the times. It is also a guide so if I find myself getting off track, I can pull myself back pretty quickly. I also make a long-term plan and a daily plan and am constantly checking to see if I am meeting the mark.

Suzie also jots down notes after meetings in order to remember key points that were discussed. Comparatively, Tracey always brings her own pen, highlighters, coloured

pens, and paper to write down questions about information she misunderstood, especially in training sessions to avoid disrupting and delaying other staff members. This strategy enables to obtain responses to her questions at a later time, one-on-one. However, to avoid feeling panicked and lost before her questions can be answered, Tracey calms herself by doing breathing exercises. Sophia also writes in a notebook to retain information that she hears.

Rationalizing.

Many participants cope by rationalizing and justifying the behaviours of others. Although Ashley asks questions to learn on the job, she understands why she may be unable to ask for help; that is, because the other associates have their own counter and their own responsibilities to look after. Tracey also rationalizes her colleagues' unsupportive behaviour by claiming that large workloads, tight deadlines, and government audits took up most of their time. Tracey states:

I think in nursing homes, in that environment, they don't have patience. They have a big client caseload. They have the government coming to audit, and check to make sure you are doing your work, and there is basically no time for a 5-minute question thing. Either you get it or you don't.

Tracey also had a staff member that she would try to go to after meetings to ask questions but she would consider that they were busy with their own work. She did not want to become dependent on her colleague; however, she became overwhelmed without support. Similarly, Sophia would justify her supervisor's stern reaction to her by subordinating her own role in the company as less important. While she disliked when her boss micromanaged, Sophia substantiated her behaviour by saying that things would not be

neglected when it was monitored closely. This presents the nurturing role of these women because they put others before themselves. However, their learning needs are not being met; they still have to find other ways to overcome their barriers of learning.

Space and time.

A few of the participants need additional time and space in order to keep up with their job demands. Tracey and Suzie provided examples of times when they arrived to work early, stayed behind and went home later to complete work. Tracey reports:

I would have to go in early to catch up with the paper work, because certain things are due by a certain date, so I would be going in early, staying late, and then coming home. ...I would take the stuff home, and I would do my brainstorming and stuff at home. ...It didn't take me long, and actually I got done a lot faster, because it was in my house, it is quiet, and I didn't have again the noisy disruptive things going on.

Consequently, Tracey accomplishes more when there are fewer distractions. However, in one instance, Tracey had to travel a distance to get home from work and get up early in the morning to go back to work; therefore, it did not leave her much time for herself. Similarly, Suzie also worked at home outside of her scheduled tour of duty to accomplish tasks in a quieter space. It was a way of getting work done without alerting others that she had a learning disability but it did not always work to her benefit. As Suzy shares:

I go home and have to spend extra time trying to figure it out, or come in early until I understand the systems that are in place, which sometimes leads to other things. People think now she is staying 2 hours late, it is still in the first 2 or 3

weeks, so I can still keep piling stuff up on afterwards because she is obviously doing it, when that is not really the case.

In Suzie's case, instead of getting things done it increased her workload. Although the participants were somewhat able to meet their work demands in such cases, it still took away from the personal time and space of their home and they did not receive any compensation for the work that they did on their own time.

Fulfilling health and wellness needs.

Some of the participants use other individual health and wellness strategies to overcome their learning challenges. For example, Maudie uses yoga techniques to help her cope in the workplace; as she reports:

The way I do it is to start to change my metabolism by slowing down my breathing rate, this action calms me down so I can think clearer and be less stressed. This is an excellent way to help yourself cope with much more than what you could normally.

Tracey uses a variety of other coping methods that include: (a) taking breaks to get away from her work environment, which helps her to feel refreshed and feel more alert; (b) eating on time, because she will get hyper if she does not eat her lunch or dinner; (c) never giving up hope that her needs will be met by her employer; and (d) working closer to home to cut down on the travel time, because she recognizes that she works better during the day than at night. Chloe also takes the time to reflect on her strengths and weaknesses to develop herself. Suzie learns to deal with her emotions to avoid losing sight of whatever is going on and missing out on some powerful brainstorming or other opportunities going on around her.

Developing personal philosophies.

Interestingly, personal philosophies have helped all participants put their challenges into perspective. The personal philosophies can also be used as “life lessons.” As Chloe observes, “prove to yourself that you can do it, and just try to do the best you can.” Ashley, meanwhile, believes that “whatever doesn’t kill you, will make you stronger” and it enables her to reflect upon the accomplishments she has achieved. Tracey recognizes the weaknesses of her clients who lived in the nursing home and reflects on her own weaknesses. She explains, “put yourself in other people’s shoes and acknowledge your accomplishments”; keeping this in mind helps Tracey to boost her self-esteem. Sophia, in turn, believes that “everyone comes from a different life. We are not all born into good things. So I am not better than the next person. They are not better than me.” Maudie reflects on a lesson she learned from a yoga instructor:

In the language in which Yoga was written, which is Sanskrit, a word for teacher is interpreted as guru or swami. Guru or swami just means to guide with knowledge. There is a very ancient Sanskrit parable that says, “Your guru or swami will help you to find your treasure box and help to give you the key to it. But only you will be able to open your treasure box, reach in and take out your treasure. Your treasure is very personal and may change each time you open your box.” No one can do this for you!

Suzie’s personal philosophy involves reflecting on her past experiences:

You have to learn from stuff, otherwise you are going to keep repeating the same stuff over and over again, and I am a big believer about going in and busting your fears no matter how uncomfortable or how tough it is, but having the courage to

go in, learn, change, and that never ever happens again. So without that experience, and allowing someone to take advantage, and not having the skills, and the ability, and the support behind me to doing it different, that is what I learned with my learning disability. You took it all on the head, and you never complained, because after all, it is all your fault, because you are dumb. That changed everything.

Suzie was frequently blamed for things that went wrong in her workplace because she generally had the lowest seniority, but she learned to utilize her voice and not be victimized. Thus, Suzie learned from the past, overcame adversity, and moved forward.

Summary of the Findings

The stories on the work experiences of 6 women with learning disabilities who participated in the study were presented in this section. Four common themes emerged from the data. The first theme represented what learning in the workplace meant to the participants, which most of the participants described as learning something new, usually with the assistance of others. The second theme revealed the challenges the participants faced in making a decision to disclose, which had an impact on fulfilling their learning needs and maintaining their self-image and self-esteem. Many of the women chose not to disclose partly because they felt that people did not understand learning disabilities and, as a result, they felt it was easier to remain silent. The third theme discussed the factors in the work environment that influenced participants' learning. Positive relationships that were understanding and supportive and environments that were nurturing enhanced their opportunity to learn. The last theme explored the coping strategies that women used to stay employed, which included strategies that they mostly used independently, focused

on their strengths rather than their weaknesses, and took in consideration their own learning. The common themes revealed that learning for the participants was centered on connectedness, voice, and trust, participation and control, support and understanding, and flexible and nurturing environments.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“People’s voice plays a key role in creating change”

(John Lord & Peggy Hutchison, 2007).

This study sought to shed light on the work experiences of women with diagnosed or suspected learning disabilities and to explore their perspectives and reflections on their learning process in order to: (a) raise awareness of the needs of women with learning disabilities, (b) enhance their opportunities to learn in the workplace, and (c) draw attention to the need to improve inclusiveness in the workplace, especially for hidden diversity. It is necessary to update job skills to remain competitive, to keep up with constant changes, and to increase better job opportunities. However, people with learning disabilities are more unlikely than their counterparts without disabilities to secure, retain, and advance in employment. In particular, many women with learning disabilities face challenges in the workplace because of their gender and disability. Currently, the literature is scarce on how individuals with learning disabilities experience learning in the workplace. In this chapter, I provide the summary of the study, discuss the key findings, provide implications for practice and further research, and close with my reflections and final thoughts.

Summary of the Study

I recruited 6 female participants in the Greater Toronto Area who had previous or current work experience in different occupations. I wanted to hear their stories about learning disabilities in the workplace, which I learned were shaped by their aspirations as well as their personal, educational, and work backgrounds. In order to obtain rich data and descriptions, I used a qualitative narrative inquiry for the research method. I

developed an interview protocol with open-ended questions to enable the participants to elaborate on their experiences. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format, in a location that best suited the participants; the interviews were recorded and were approximately 45 to 80 minutes in length. The data were transcribed verbatim and the personal accounts of the participants were reviewed and analyzed for common themes that represented successful and challenging learning experiences and effective learning strategies in the workplace. The data analysis included four main themes: making sense of learning in the workplace; the hidden dilemma (to disclose or not to disclose); the work environment (facilitating or obstructing learning); and surviving in the workplace.

Discussion of Findings

The diverse experiences provided some important insights into understanding the experiences of women living with learning disabilities in the workplace. The results of the study revealed that the positive and negative outcomes for learning were influenced by: (a) work relationships and interactive connections, (b) the condition of the learning environment, and (c) self-determination and taking responsibility.

Work Relationships and Interactive Connections

Informal learning is important for the learning and development of women with learning disabilities in the workplace (Ashton, 2004; Bierema, 2001; Fenwick, 2004; Fuller et al., 2007; Kahn, 2007; Livingstone, 2007; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Ragins & Dutton, 2007). In this study, informal learning was enhanced through positive relationships and interactions which reaffirm the literature indicating that women learn through relationships and connections (Bierema, 2001; English, 2006; Flannery, 2000b, Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Hayes, 2001; Mackeracher, 2004). Consequently, this leads to

the women's autonomy and independence. Contrary to earlier studies that focused primarily on family and friends as primary supports for individuals with learning disabilities, this study's participants relied heavily upon relationships with their managers and/or colleagues for support and assistance. In fact, the majority of participants identified relationships and workplace support as necessary accommodations. Similar to the literature (e.g., Castellanos & Septeowski, 2004; Field et al., 2003; Foley, 2006; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Obi, 2004; Price et al., 2002; Rath & Royer, 2002), these findings showed that accommodations were essential to the success of learning for women with learning disabilities; it provided them with equal opportunity for personal growth. Moreover, the source of knowledge learned from other employees and managers, who possessed the knowledge, experience, skills, or tools, embodied some of the knowledge they learned (Billett, 2004). In other words, the participants' learning was dependant on the resource of knowledge and skills held by more experienced workers.

Positive interactions were critically important in establishing a social context for asking questions in order to clarify, understand, comprehend, and reinforce what they learned. Many participants required repetition through asking questions in order to retain information due to the nature of their disability. Rogers (2007) concurs: "Without reinforcement, skill and knowledge will fade quickly" (p. 33). Asking questions and receiving responses from experienced workers gave most of the participants the tools they required to master their job tasks and gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Also, asking questions drew out the women's voices (Hayes, 2000c). The findings further revealed that workplace conditions that enabled participants to ask questions was essential for creating innovative ways of efficiency and productivity. In some cases, the

use of questions led to team building and trust building in work relationships as employees learn from each other (Ashton, 2004; Reina & Reina, 2006). According to some participants, it was difficult to learn if they worked alone because it restricted their chance to clarify and gain better understandings of what they needed to know.

Most participants believed learning was negatively impacted as a result of coworkers' lack of understanding about learning disabilities and women's issues in the workplace; many of the participants did not reveal that they had a learning disability—they felt it was a risk and did not want to suffer the repercussions related to being discriminated and stigmatized by their management and colleagues. Therefore, it was no surprise that understanding from management and colleagues was considered an accommodation. The literature states that women learn in a variety of ways (Cranton, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; English, 2006); yet, the results of this study suggest that asking questions was dismissed as a form of learning because it did not fall under the organizations' standards of learning. Alternatively, many of the women chose to maintain positive work relationships and opted not to ask questions, thereby limiting their own learning and opportunities for career development. In fact, some participants felt that asking questions posed a threat because they were perceived as being incompetent, which resulted in fellow workers becoming frustrated. At times, this left some of the women feeling like they were a burden and they gave up using their voices because they knew they would not be heard; their learning was not taken in account, which substantiates Fenwick's (2004) claim that women's activities are neglected. As a result, it made the atmosphere uncomfortable.

Some managers and colleagues undermined the work relationships with the participants in numerous ways, such as: failing to deal with an employee's work related issue; allowing peers to provide direct feedback on job performance; withholding job advancement; openly drawing attention to mistakes; and treating an employee poorly because of male dominated cultural values, which can be based on gender and disability factors (Bierema, 2001; Fenwick, 2004; Mojab & Gorman, 2003). This resulted in the participants having mixed emotions, which included frustration, humiliation, resentment, mistrust, and fear. The literature suggests that emotions are triggered by experiences of being stigmatized and feeling fear (McDonald et al., 2009; Ragins, 2008); however, this study proposes that the emotional reactions related to difficult work relationships and difficulty performing job tasks and at times led to poor health, which ultimately distracted participants from learning. These experiences resemble the emotional responses of victims of bullying, which also result in mental and physical health impacts (Lewis, 2006). Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2005) report that

bullying at work may be defined as repeated actions and practices that are directed at one or more workers, which may be done deliberately or unconsciously, but unwanted by the victim, and manifestly cause humiliation, offence and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause unpleasant working environment. (p. 230)

Often in this study, the actions of colleagues and management appeared to be unconscious.

The encouragement and understanding gained from supportive relationships helped women with learning disabilities by building their self-esteem and reassuring them about performing their job duties effectively, which is similar to Flannery's (2000b)

claim that women's learning is related to self-esteem. In situations when participants experienced positive relationships, they felt valued, appreciated; empowered, and respected. It gave them opportunities to be authentic, comfortable, and relaxed. Conversely, in situations when participants experienced poor relationships and no interactions, the quality of their learning suffered.

Condition of the Learning Environment

Many of the women required additional time to process and retain information, which was essential to learn their job tasks; therefore, they required a learning environment that would accommodate their individual learning style, individual learning pace, and personal involvement of their development. The results of this study confirmed the claims that Fuller and Unwin (2004) reported about learning opportunities in expansive environments and barriers to learning in restrictive environments. In expansive work environments, many participants received adequate support in order to help them gradually transition into new job duties, were recognized as learners with different learning styles that required different paces to learn, and received appropriate autonomy to make decisions about their learning, which supports the claims that women learn from autonomy and from making their own choices (Hayes, 2001; Mackeracher, 2004). Like a few participants in this study, expansive environments enabled them to freely ask for assistance which in turn allowed them to maximize their learning and feel more satisfied with their job performance.

Similarly, the learning opportunities of many participants were restricted because they were not provided with support for: their new job responsibilities, their individual learning pace, learning style, or personal contribution to their own learning, and access to

personal development associated with learning new tasks and gaining knowledge when compared to their peers. In addition, inadequate training and insufficient time to learn prevented participants from asking questions. This concurs with literature (English 2006; Fenwick, 2004; Hayes, 2000a; Howell et al., 2002; Jackson, 2003) previously reviewed about women being excluded from their own development and the context of learning disabilities being ignored.

These results showed that the women's learning was controlled and maintained by the employer who managed the access to learning, the process of learning, and the duration of learning, which represents an imbalance of power. In this study, participants who faced this type of circumstance in their workplace talked about feeling lost, resentful, unappreciated, and frustrated; therefore, they were less likely to ask for help. Fast-paced environments were also challenging and stressful for many of the participants because these conditions allowed little time to concentrate and process their learning. Also, poor physical environments, such as noisy, untidy, and small spaces made learning more difficult for some participants. These environments were distracting and resulted in a decrease in productivity.

Work environments that were flexible and nurturing offered more opportunities for learning and developing in the workplace for women with learning disabilities, unlike restrictive environments, which limited opportunities for learning and development, regardless if it was physical, work structure, or pertained to workload issues.

Self-Determination and Taking Responsibility

The women in the study felt a sense of self-control, independence, autonomy, and a deeper understanding of themselves when they took responsibility for their learning.

Similar to Gerber, Reiff, and Ginsberg's (1992) claim on reframing and Field et al.'s (2003) study on self-determination, the results from this study revealed that individual determination and taking responsibility contributed to individual success of learning. For participants to survive in the workplace, especially if they decided to conceal their disability, it was important for them to recognize their strengths and their weaknesses as learners, understand their learning style, identify the best context for learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998), and find ways to build their self-concept as learners. Most of the women achieved this by creating innovative ways of coping with their disability. The common coping mechanism used by participants involved substituting their weakness for someone else's strength and reciprocating by assisting their coworkers in other ways. Hence, the participants learned to use a variety of other learning strategies to cope, such as writing things down, which enabled them to perform their job tasks more effectively. Moreover, they developed personal philosophies that allowed them to believe in themselves, to be positive, and to make light of their challenges.

Yet, assuming full responsibility for their learning in the workplace ran the risk of increasing job demands and pressure at work. The women were determined to do their best to master their job tasks; however, they often used their personal time and space, without being fairly compensated, to keep up with their workload but it often impacted their life outside of work, such as having less time for themselves (Gouthro, 2005; Hayes, 2000b; Mojab & Gorman, 2003). Some of the other coping mechanisms that the participants used appeared to offer them temporary solutions to learning situations, which did not deal directly with the learning disability and their resultant needs. At times the women displayed nurturing characteristics by being more concerned about the welfare of

others, alternatively placing their needs last as a result of rationalizing the reasons for not receiving support. Subsequently, some participants felt frustrated and discouraged.

Moreover, this study suggests that the emotional health of women with learning disabilities who try to balance work and life, camouflage their disability, and deal with the everyday challenges on their own is impacted negatively and can lead to stress and burnout, which in turn can interfere with their learning process.

Using individual learning strategies, knowing learning styles, and recognizing strengths and weakness can enhance learning in the workplace. However, managing learning alone can be challenging, which concurs with the findings from Field et al.'s (2003) study which claims that collaboration can foster self-determination.

This study substantiates the claims from the literature that the combination of being a woman and having a disability impacts women's learning (Fenwick, 2004; Flannery, 2000b; Gouthro, 2005; Jackson, 2003; Mojab & Gorman, 2003) which resulted in the women not having the opportunity to: feel comfortable and safe about disclosing, participate in their developmental process, make choices of the conditions of the workplace, and take into account their learning. This relates to power imbalances, structural barriers, and societal pressures. Generally, the success of learning for these women with learning disabilities was attributed to: (a) working in environments that complemented their learning style and their personality and allowed them to make decisions that will best suit their needs; (b) developing positive work relationships and having the power to use their voices; (c) working in supportive environments that allow them to perform their jobs more effectively and efficiently; (d) being valued, understood, and respected; and (e) being determined and taking responsibility of their learning, by

identifying learning strategies, learning styles, and strengths and weaknesses.

Participants expressed a greater chance of maximizing their full potential, improving their job performance, and becoming more productive if they were accommodated.

On the contrary, participants identified workplace barriers to learning that included: (a) work environments that were unsupportive and inconsiderate of their learning needs, abilities, and their voice; (b) a lack of interaction and poor relationships with coworkers and managers; (c) being treated unfairly and being misunderstood; and (d) inadequate training. Participants struggled and were less likely to succeed, less productive, and were unable to meet job requirements, which at times resulted in job termination.

These results suggest that a mutual involvement is required by the individuals and the organization to enhance learning and development. The findings from this study showed that participants rarely disclosed their requirements because they felt uncomfortable and unprotected, even though it would improve their learning. This illustrates the gap between individuals with learning disabilities to disclose their disability in order to obtain reasonable accommodations and the employer who is responsible for providing a safe and trusting work environment that enables employees to feel comfortable and safe to disclose. Employees are more productive in trusting environments (Reina & Reina, 2006).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study strongly emphasize the importance for workplace conditions to be more supportive of the individual needs of each employee and more knowledgeable and understanding about disability issues and women's issues in the

workplace, so that women with learning disabilities might have greater opportunities of learning. Four main recommendations are presented here, which include: (a) to bring awareness about learning disabilities (voiced by many of the participants) and awareness about women's issues to the forefront; (b) to create and maintain positive work environments; (c) to accept different learning styles; and (d) to provide employee-centered workplaces.

First, many employers, employees, and educators are not fully knowledgeable about issues relating to the struggles faced by some women with learning disabilities. Knowledge is power; consequently, the primary recommendation that the participants made was to educate people in the workplace, including educational institutions and people in the general public, about learning disabilities and other hidden disabilities, such as having information readily available in public areas such as banks and job fairs. Hidden disabilities in particular are difficult to visualize, therefore it can be difficult for people to believe this type of disability exists. Many participants believed that information about disabilities should be mandatory in workplace training programs, in order to provide all employees first-hand experiences of the challenges that individuals with disabilities face. This suggestion can also apply to information about the challenges of women in the workplace. The results showed that women were discriminated against due in part to their specific needs being misunderstood and neglected. As a result, they did not have the opportunity to demonstrate their skills to their full potential. Participants' stories reinforced the need for open communication about diversity, in particular enforcing policies and implementing appropriate disciplinary action in the event of violation of the

regulations. In addition, it is important to offer accommodations for the variety of individual needs.

It would be helpful if training information were provided in different formats to accommodate individual needs and employees could discuss any of their issues or concerns at anytime. Moreover, recognizing people with hidden disabilities and gender could allow these individuals an opportunity to: be authentic, disclose their related disability requirements without having to worry about the outcome, heighten their strengths instead of disguising themselves and hiding behind their true identity, and show their talents.

It is necessary for employers, employees, and educators to recognize their own hidden biases or stereotypes to monitor and change their own behaviours, the workplace, job expectations, and societal norms with regards to women and individuals with learning disabilities. They may be unaware of their actions that may make the people they work with feel uncomfortable. In addition, employers, employees, and educators need to implement strategies that can address their hidden biases. This may include being sensitive to terminology such as incompetent, stupid, lazy, too emotional, and overreacting. Awareness could eliminate misconceptions and bring about more understanding about issues around disabilities and gender. Ultimately, awareness could give women with disabilities a greater sense of acceptance, and establish positive work environments.

Second, it is important for employers to honour their commitments about diversity and not make empty promises to maintain a positive work environment. This can be extremely helpful, especially during the early stages of the job process. For instance,

online applications can be complicated, although the skills necessary to complete the application are unrelated to the job (Markel & Barclay, 2009). It takes time to learn how to submit the resume but it may be insufficient time for some applicants to meet the deadline. First impressions can have major impacts. People of diversity may be discouraged instead of encouraged to apply because they feel they are not being accommodated. Therefore, it would be beneficial to have alternate ways of submitting applications. Employers can make people with differences feel welcome by asking if any accommodations are required from the initial stages to the end of the job process (job interview, job orientation, and job span) and follow through with it on a continuous basis. Also, this may make individuals feel more comfortable to disclose their needs.

Third, each participant had their unique experiences; there were commonalities but none of the stories were identical and each identified how important learning styles were for enhancing learning. Educators may prefer a particular style of learning; however that style may be unsuitable for others and may aggravate the employees' difficulties with learning (Burke & Doolan, 2008; Mackeracher, 2004). According to Mackeracher (2004), there is no best way of learning. Gadbow (2002) states that "considering all learners as special means seeing the possibilities as well as the problems or particular needs" (p. 105). Hence, it is important to treat everyone as being unique and to embrace each other's needs.

Finally, no employees should be left behind because of their differences. It is crucial that each employee has equitable opportunity to learn in the workplace. In order to accomplish this, it would be beneficial if the following were considered: the atmosphere is conducive to individual learning, the employees' needs and interest are

met, and support is provided to better their opportunities to succeed in the workplace (Cranton, 1992; Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Wlodkowski, 2008).

Given the results, an employee-centered approach that includes individualized coaching would benefit women with learning disabilities. Coaching addresses many of the concerns that the participants discussed with regards to involvement in learning, support, equality, and understanding. The literature suggests that coaching focuses on the person as an individual (Rogers, 2007). There is a mutual respect between the coach and the employees who work together to achieve a successful outcome of lifelong learning; there is no place for judging, the employees are accepted for who they are (Rogers, 2007). The employees receive guidance and support and have the full autonomy to make decisions regarding the development of their skills, abilities, and knowledge (Rogers, 2007; Stone, 2007). The coach has the opportunity to get to know the employee better by helping to identify the strengths and weaknesses, setting goals, assessing training needs, listening to emotions, giving feedback, and monitoring progress on a continual basis (Rogers, 2007; Stone, 2007). In other words, it will be ideal for the coach to hear the stories of the employees and allow them the chance to customize their own development.

Implications for Further Research

Some of the challenges that women with learning disabilities faced in the workplace have been outlined; however, there is a need for further investigation in this area given the limitations of this study. Many factors that may influence learning were omitted, such as culture, race, class, socioeconomic status, roles and responsibilities outside the workplace, other disabilities, learning outside of the workplace, and ethnicity. According to Davis (2005), "certain ways of doing things have been reified as norms in

our culture, but not, perhaps, in others” (p. 168). Two of the participants volunteered that they were mothers but I am uncertain of the roles and responsibilities of some of the other participants, which might have impacted their learning. As a result of this omission, it leads me to believe that the finding from the study drew more attention to the disability issue rather than the combination of gender and disabilities. Also, the time was limited and prevented the participants from revealing their entire story pertaining to their background and work life. A longitudinal study would be helpful to fully capture the experience of women with learning disabilities in the workplace.

The sample size was small; therefore, more women need to be included in future studies. In addition, the sample failed to fully represent the diversity that is found in Canada. The women in the study were Caucasian and spoke English fluently. However, many individuals who live in Canada do not speak English fluently; therefore, it will be important to explore the challenges of women with learning disabilities in the workplace where English is spoken as their second language.

The participants expressed an array of emotions. Organizations tend to ignore emotions (Bierema, 2008; Gallos, 2008). The emotional state of an employee can impact their well-being which can influence the quality of learning (Bierema, 2008). If an employee evokes negative emotions such as frustration, it can make it more difficult to concentrate; in contrast, if their emotional state is positive (i.e., satisfied), an employee is more likely to succeed in learning in the workplace (Basch & Fisher, 2000). Hence, it is important to look at ways of dealing with the emotions of employees so they are better able to understand the influences on learning and health and well-being.

Moreover, online learning has become a popular method of learning in the workplace (Park & Wentling, 2007). It offers employees access to training at their own time and at their own pace. However, with the rise of online training and the decrease of face-to-face training, further research is required to determine the impacts on learning for women with learning disabilities, especially when they need a supportive environment to learn successfully. As a result of limited research in this area, there will continue to be a need to gather data and to make further improvements in the workplace.

Reflections and Final Thoughts

According to Cranton (1992), “The process of reflection which is a key component of learning includes returning to an experience, using positive ideas and feelings involved, examining and removing ideas or feelings which are obstacles to learning and reevaluating the experience” (p. 57). Reflecting has shaped my learning, understanding, and appreciation of others, especially individuals with disabilities. I reflected on the stories of the women with learning disabilities, which has given me a better understanding of the challenges they face in the workplace, and I connected them with my story not only as a researcher, but also as an educator, a former manager, and an individual. Barbara Deming, an advocate for non-violent social change, stated that “We learn best to listen to our own voices if we are listening at the same time to other women—whose stories, for all our differences, turn out, if we listen well, to be our stories also” (as cited in Cook, Deger, & Gibson, 2007, p. 617).

As a researcher, I realized how important it was to offer accommodations to the participants in the study. I could not simply follow the standardized way of conducting research such as mailing the letter of invitation to the participants and assume that they

could read it and understand it. I had to keep in mind at all times that the participants had a variety of ways of processing information. I believe that offering accommodations allowed me to build a strong rapport with the participants, made them feel comfortable, and willing to share their stories. I was able to relate to the participants as human beings because many of their stories were similar to my stories. Fortunately, I kept in contact with some of the participants and we became friends.

As an educator, I recognize the importance of appreciating each student as an individual with unique ways of learning, to be open and to embrace the opportunity to learn from others, to be patient, and to provide unconditional support. I strongly believe that everyone deserves a chance to learn. I remember attending web-based seminars to increase my opportunities to get employment. There were some facilitators that used a variety of methods to engage everyone who was participating and there were facilitators who just spoke for the full session, which at times lasted up to 1.5 hours without any opportunity to ask questions. Needless to say, I found it very difficult to concentrate. I often thought of the participants in my study and questioned how they would learn in this type of format, especially when there was little time to process the information. This experience reinforced the importance of taking into account the learning of others.

As in former role as a manager, my responsibilities were to support and develop my staff; however, I did things that would create barriers to the learning of the women with learning disabilities. I recognized that I made some poor choices. I used to depend on my staff who I believed were high performers and assign special projects to them to develop their skills, knowledge, and abilities. However, I would not provide the same opportunities to employees whom I perceived as low performers. I compared their

quality of work to the quality of my work because I did the same job before, but I ignored the fact that my employees did not always share my skills. My main focus was getting the job done quickly. Should I be given the same opportunity to manage staff, I would definitely change my managerial style to be more accommodating to individual needs and listen to the employees' stories. All employees deserve the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge; they are not robots—they are human beings.

As an individual, the most important lesson that I learned is to treat people how they want to be treated, and not the way I want to be treated, in order to avoid imposing personal values and beliefs onto them. There is still so much that I need to learn. I have been judgemental of people with hidden disabilities in the past. I truly apologize for that. In turn, I would like to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities. I want to avoid being a contributor to stigmatization.

Learning is about change. It is never too late to learn. We can change how we treat individuals in the workplace. By no means is there an expectation that change will happen immediately. It is important not to close the door on opportunities; that door could be closed on an employee who can make a positive difference in the world. This cannot be done without compassion. As Lord and Hutchison (2007) state, “compassion continues to be needed in order to be able to open our hearts to ourselves and others. We need compassion and patience as we work with others for change” (p. 245).

The participants I interviewed strongly support the need for this research and they are happy their voices are being heard and their words are being read; they had the opportunity to reflect about their lives, learn more about themselves, recognize their strengths, and work towards personal improvements. Most importantly, the participants

are willing to learn to develop their skills and knowledge and they want to work to contribute to the prosperity of their communities. One of the participants of this study was in tears because she desperately wants to work and maintain a job for a long period of time but due to the nature of her disability, this has been difficult for her to achieve.

I hope the stories shared in this study let other women with learning disabilities know that they are not alone in their struggles, to feel good about themselves, and to accept themselves for who they are. Finally, I hope our society embraces women with learning disabilities and accepts them for who they are.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Participants

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: _____ **Name:** _____

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me to today. This interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes of your time to complete. I am doing these interviews with individuals with learning disabilities (LD) who have enrolled with the employment resource centre that specializes in assisting individuals with learning disabilities, in Toronto. The interviews will be pulled together and used to explore the stories of women and their workplace experiences with learning disabilities. This interview will be used for this purpose only and will be kept confidential. Your name will not be mentioned. A pseudonym will be used. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations will be used instead. The session will be taped for accuracy. If you do not feel comfortable with the tape recorder, I will take notes instead. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation. If, at any time, you no longer wish to continue, you may withdraw from the study up until the study has ended, without any penalties. If you have any questions about the study, I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail.

Note: Questions that have been italicized in Part II represent probing questions.

Part 1– Background Information

1. Age: _____

2. Have you been diagnosed with a learning disability?

Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Educational Background:

What is your highest level of education? _____

4. How did you get involved with the Learning Disability Centre?

5. Are you currently employed?Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, what is your current job function?

Part II– Interview Questions**1. How would you describe your typical day in your workplace?****2. What does learning in the workplace mean to you?****3. How would you describe your learning experiences in the workplace?***i) What kind of work environment helps you to learn?**ii) What kind of work environment prevents you from learning?***4. What strategies do you use to support your own learning in the workplace?***i) What strategies do you use during formal learning, such as training?**ii) What strategies do you use during informal learning?***5. What has been your most successful learning experience in the workplace?***i) How were you able to achieve this?**ii) Who or what has had an impact on this?**iii) How has it influenced your learning?***6. What has been your most challenging learning experience in the workplace?***i) How did you overcome your challenge?***7. If you could change anything about the way in which you learn at work to make you become more successful, in the future, what would that be?***i) What do you think you will be able to do with your learning experiences in the next five years?***Is there anything more that you would like to add?***Thank you for so much for your time for the interview and all that you have shared with me.*

Appendix B

Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter



**Brock
University**

Office of Research Services

Research Ethics Office

St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1

T: 905-688-5550 Ext. 3035/4876 F: 905-688-0748

www.brocku.ca

DATE: October 17, 2008

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB) *Michelle K. McGinn*

TO: Nancy Fenton, Education
Melissa Augustin

FILE: 08-064 FENTON/AUGUSTIN
Masters Thesis/Project

TITLE: Making the Invisible Visible: Exploring the Workplace Experiences of Women with Learning Disabilities

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: ACCEPTED AS CLARIFIED

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of **October 17, 2008 to March 31, 2009** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms> to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form *Continuing Review/Final Report* is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/an